NEXT
GENERATION

E3
The winners
and losers
revealed
Inside

The world's **#1** computer and videogame authority

Issue 44 **August** 1998

The Battle Begins

PlayStation SONY
How long does it have?

Project X
Is it for real?

Dreamcast
Can it be stopped?

Nintendo 64
Can it survive?

The next console war is here

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HAPPY DAYS ARE HERE AGAIN

At this year's E3, Next Generation could almost feel the smiles on the show floor. Computer and videogames are seeing their second record year in a row, everyone is making money, and it's a difficult task to find an unhappy third party. There were so many solid, quality games being shown that even the best titles — *Zelda, Metal Gear,* and *Prey* — had a hard time really standing out.

The game industry is in the midst of another golden age: There are more great games and more people playing them — and both of these numbers are still growing. Intelligence this month (page 22) features some of the best games shown at E3 this year, and some of them will inevitably go on to become beloved classics some day.

Still, it would be shortsighted to assume that the high the industry is on today will last forever, especially on the console side. Games have grown into as large and legitimate an entertainment industry as movies, but even Hollywood has slumps. And so, another period of change is upon us and explored in our feature this month, "The Console Wars of 1999" (page 36). And it will tell you just how the industry will face the next millennium.

NEXT GENERATION

ALL GAME

NO HYPE

HOMEWORLD

August 1998

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The secret of GT's success

In 1993, GT Interactive took a highly successful shareware game called Wolfenstein 3D and turned it into a retail success — chiefly by avoiding the software specialty stores and putting it straight into Wallmart. Five years later, GT is second only to Electronic Arts in the U.S. market. **Next Generation** talks to GT Interactive President Ron Chaimowitz and asks, "Was it beginner's luck?"

The console wars of 1999

Moving onto 1999, the video and computer game industry is at a unique point in its history. Never before has the next generation of consoles been ready to go before the last one was quite dead. Sega and VM Labs are preparing new hardware while Sony and Nintendo are arguably doing better than ever. How will this affect the industry's progress into the next millennium?

Intelligence

Next Generation's E3 show report • Best of show/worst of show • More on Dreamcast • Project X software update • GameWorks OKs the "A" word • Plus, all the regular columns

Alphas: the best of what's next

Lots of groundbreaking titles this month, including, Omikron, Homeworld, Redjack, Tiny Tank, Need For Speed III, Dark Vengeance, and a profile of Psygnosis; plus, Milestones

Finals: 21 games reviewed

Here at last: Unreal, Might and Magic VI, Sanitarium, Burning Rangers, International Superstar Soccer, Mission: Impossible, Monster Truck Madness 2

NG Index

Welcome to the **NG Index**. Each reference is to the first page of the story in which the game, company, or name appears.

Enter a violent age of bloody combat and voodoo, where pistols and scabbards defend against avenging spirits and a grisly death.

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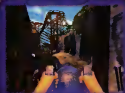
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IT'S TIME YOU

1998's BIGGEST GAME!
- PC Gamer

THE SECRET OF
GT'S SUCCESS

I n 1993, a two-man start-up called GT Interactive took a game that had already been successful on shareware and persuaded Walmart to let them repackage it and sell it in stores up and down the country. That game was *Wolfenstein 3D*, and the game industry has never been the same since. GT Interactive has since grown to become the second largest publisher of third-party games in the U.S. In some categories and by some measures, it's even beginning to inch ahead of the once-insurmountable Electronic Arts.

So how did it happen? And where did GT come from in the first place? **Next Generation** traveled to New York City to meet with President Ron Chamowitz.

Sneaking through the back door

NG: Where did GT Interactive come from?

Ron: We came on to the scene about four years ago. Although many people suspected we came from nowhere, we came out of the music and video business. There are many similarities between the game business and the music and video business, and we felt that there was an opportunity for us to implement many of the business models and trends that we saw be successful with music and video.

However, when we began, we knew it would be very foolish for us to come on the scene and say, "Here we are, and we're going to compete against you, Electronic Arts, you Broderbund, you MicroProse" and think that we could start our own studio and be a publisher all at once. So instead we decided to start first in the budget, value-priced software part of the business, this being a model that we knew would work from the video business.

NG: So you used the "budget" sub-$20 software business to get your foot in the door.

Ron: Right. At that time most of the major software publishers were not interested in budget software. They were also not interested in the mass merchant channel of distributor: the Walmarts, the KMarts, etc. Instead, they relied upon the specialty software stores.

So we went to all the different game publishers and said, "Listen, why don't you sublicense your hit products to us after they've peaked and towards the end of their life cycle. Walmart has said that they will give us a test in 500 stores, and we'll repackage the product, manufacture it, and put it in one-size boxes, and we'll put it out between $9.96 and $14.96." Most people said, "Yeah, OK," and we had agreements with EA, Broderbund, MicroProse, and the whole industry

NG: Why did they agree so readily?

Ron: For them it was an incremental type of revenue because they were doing less than 5% of their sales in the mass merchant channel anyway And they had nothing to lose because they didn't think it would be all that successful

NG: But it was successful

Ron: It wound up being extremely successful Walmart felt that it was so successful they asked us to take on distributing all computer software to all Walmart stores in January of 1994. Now, distribution wasn't necessarily my or Joe Cayre's (cofounder of GT Interactive) area of expertise, but we figured that if we pulled it off, it would help us in other ways. First, we would be able to achieve critical size and mass in a very short period of time. Second, we would be able to attract external development talent to the company because they would know that we were able to guarantee them shelf space within the mass merchant channel and that we would have very strong distribution. Third, we felt we could start selling other retailers on a direct basis. And all of this would help towards our primary goal, which was becoming a major publisher

Enter the Wolfenstein

NG: Most gamers remember seeing the GT name for the first time in connection with *Wolfenstein 3D* or *Doom 2* — certainly with an id product. How did the relationship come about?

Ron: We'd been looking at the shareware business for development talent, and one of the first companies I came upon was id Software, who was enjoying tremendous success with *Wolfenstein 3D* on shareware. I decided to take a risk and bring it to retail.

At this time, many people thought that shareware couldn't be successful in retail stores. Additionally, there were

> If you want a hit, **you have to devote significant marketing**, merchandising, and promotional resources **to the product**

people in the publishing community who thought that first-person 3D action would not be a successful format on the PC. But we went ahead and released *Wolfenstein 3D* as our first retail product and did almost 200,000 units, because of that success went back to id and convinced them that they should develop a separate retail item after they developed *Doom*, which they'd call *Doom 2*.

NG: And this is when things really take off ...

Ron: We now had established distribution within the mass-merchant channel. We were able to sell every single major computer software retailer on a direct basis. And in *Doom 2* we had what we believed to be a very strong retail title that we

planned to put significant marketing, merchandising, and promotion behind. We also made the decision that we would promote id as a label and a studio instead of GT because we'd learned from the music and video business that the consumer really doesn't care if the product came from GT, EA, or whatever. They are more interested in the product itself and perhaps the studio. So we hired a PR firm to promote id, and we promoted id as the creative studio behind *Doom*. The combination led to the shipping of the largest PC title in the history of the industry at that time, as we shipped over 500,000 units of *Doom 2*. And that was the launch of GT Publishing.

NG: Many people reckon that you just got lucky. They'll say that with Sega*mar*'s luck, you just happened to make the right deal, with the right developer, at the right time. Could GT be where it is today without id Software?

Ron: When you look at the entertainment business, whether it's software, music, or film, oftentimes a company will be very successful because they aligned themselves with some very strong creative talent. I think that id was an integral part of helping us build our publishing business, but there are many companies that have similar success with software — and Broderbund is an example with *Myst* — that are not able to use that success and build from it. There's no question that id was a very integral part of us building our publishing business. But we leveraged that success to build a major publishing company. We've proved that we were able to take it to the next level.

Buckets of cash

NG: So what did you do with the money that *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Doom 2* earned?

Ron: We knew that we could not be dependent on any one studio or any one development talent. So we began forming relationships with other external developers who were also attracted to us. Similar to the way it is in the music business, when you have success, other talent is attracted to your company. So we began signing up a number of strong, external developers, as well as forming a strategic relationship with Midway Games.

We knew that as a publisher we needed more control over our destiny, and we wanted more control over the game brands and franchises that we published. We also knew that we didn't know how to build it ourselves because we didn't come from the development community, and we felt the only way to succeed was to buy already established, well-managed studios. So we went public in December of 1995, raised some currency, and in the last two years we've acquired eight companies, including Humongous, SingleTrac, WizardWorks, we have an interest in Oddworld, and so on, and now our internal studio capability has grown from zero to about 27 to 30% of our revenue, and we anticipate having it grow to about 45 to 50% of our revenue.

NG: So you started buying up talent. This leads us to another common criticism of GT — or, at least, common gripe from companies not doing as well as you — and that is that your success can be attributed to having a large checkbook. "GT simply bought their way into the game industry" is what your competitors say. What is your response to this?

Ron: Look at the track record of the major film studios over the last 15 to 20 years who've thrown a lot of money at the game business. I'm talking about Viacom, Time-Warner, BMG, etc., and they were completely and totally unsuccessful. So money in and of itself is not the ingredient to be successful. It takes a certain mind-set, a certain ability to deal with creative talent, and a certain intuitive feel for creative product, and the ability to develop an infrastructure and management team that can lead you to success. Besides, I think it's a little bit of a misnomer that we threw a lot of money around. I think when we signed our deal with id, it was the richest deal at that time for a developer, although today it's small compared to what people are paying now.

NG: How did you feel when GT was dubbed "the new Acclaim"?

Ron: I understood it. We were a New York-based company, and we did not have an internal studio capability. And that was one of the faults that people had with Acclaim. It didn't bother me. Acclaim was an extremely successful company in a short period of time, and we did have some similarities in terms of approach, but I think we have proven to the publishing community that we are a very different company. We also focus more on the PC, they focus more on console. And they were more heavily dependent on licensed properties, and we were more interested in working with people to develop original products.

That about wraps it up for G.O.D.

NG: Next Generation recently interviewed Mike Wilson and Harry Miller of Gathering of Developers. Mike Wilson, an ex-Id employee, was very critical of publishers in general and of GT Interactive in particular. He believes that GT got rich by exploiting Id and goes on to lament having "watched GT start believing that they were the ones that had made Doom 2 such a hit, and watched them start believing that they could achieve the same success with any piece of shit that they threw in a box." How do you feel about his comments?

Ron: I think he used GT more as an example than leveling any accusations against GT specifically. Obviously, we are a very successful publisher. We are the second largest entertainment publisher in this industry, so it's easy to take shots at us, at EA, and at similar companies

I am surprised at many of his comments, especially as he wasn't at many of the places at the times he's making comments about. For example, for the first few years we worked with Id, Mike wasn't even there. More than anything I would say it was naivete and a general lack of experience that leads him to many of his comments. That's probably where I should leave it.

NG: Do you agree with his belief that relationships between game developers and publishers are at an all-time-low?

Ron: I don't agree with that at all. I think it's to his benefit to give that impression. Look, in any entertainment enterprise — music, music, whatever — you are always going to find talent who isn't happy with its publishing. However, the majority of the talent are happy with their publishers because they know the entire mechanism that is necessary for success. It's a team effort.

NG: So, following on from the issues raised by G.O.D., what is the role of the publisher? In 1998, what does a game publisher do, exactly?

Ron: A publisher in the game industry is in many ways similar to publishers in film and music. The role of the publisher, first and foremost, is to fund. It's to take the risk of funding the product development, whether it's a game, a film, or a record.

NG: So it's about putting up the money for a project that may or may not pay off.

Ron: Right. If we spend a million or a million and a half and then only sell 15 or 20,000, then we lose money. Everyone thinks about the hits and the times when publishers make a lot of money. But for all of the hits there are a number of failures that we have to pay for. And this means you have to have people on your staff who are able to determine what has the potential to be a good product and hopefully a hit

So it's an A&R type of function as well as a funding function. Once the talent has been recognized and you are funding that talent, the publisher's role is two-fold. First, it's to work with that talent, with regards to allowing them the creative freedom to realize the passion they have to build their game. Second, and at the same time, it's getting the publisher's marketing and PR team involved to help make the game a success. And then lastly, and most importantly, it's selling and distribution — because if you can't get your product on the shelf, then no one's going to know about it.

NG: Does a great game really need all of this marketing, merchandising, promotion, PR, and so on? Can't a great game stand on its own feet?

Ron: You can have a great product. But if no one knows

about it, then it doesn't do anybody any good. Every game needs a very strong, well-heeled marketing and promotional machine behind it to make it successful. Even more so in today's market, especially in the console market where TV advertising has grown increasingly more important. In the PC business, see what we've done with Unreal — we've been promoting Unreal for the last six months ...

NG: Longer than that (smiles)

Ron: Well, nine months then (smiles). You have to differentiate top products. There's so much noise in the PC business. If you want to make a hit, you really have to devote

> There's **no question that Id** was a very integral part of us **building our publishing business.** But we **leveraged that success**

significant marketing, merchandising, and promotional resources to the product. Today these budgets actually exceed the amount you're spending on product development.

NG: So, just to play devil's advocate, why not simply bypass all the publishers — all the noise makers — all together and simply go straight from developer to retailer?

Ron: If you have no marketing, merchandising, and promotion, how would the consumer know about the product? How would they be attracted to your product once they got to retail? You would be depending upon them to look at a box and pick it up and buy it. If you are not out there, we're finding at least six months before the product arrives,

telling consumers about the products, it will die on the shelves. We've had a lot of very good products never become more than, you know, 15 to 20,000 units, even with a lot of marketing and promotion behind it.

NG: How important to a game's success is whether or not it's actually any good?

Ron: It's of first and foremost importance. The game has to be great. If it's not a great game you will not have word of mouth, you will not grab the attention of the gamer, and more importantly, from our perspective, you will not be able to build a brand. Because with a great game you are able to build a brand and then have sequels and mission packs and opportunities in other media. So if you don't have a great game, with all the marketing and merchandising, great distribution and great executives, it's meaningless

> The **role of the publisher**, first and foremost,
> is to fund. It's to take the **risk** of funding the
> product development

The future ...

NG: We conducted a brief straw poll in the Imagine Media offices, and we asked journalists what they thought of the games you have in the pipeline. The consensus was that there are a couple of exciting projects, a load of "mediocre" games, and a load of "poor games." How do you feel about this?

Ron: If you look at any publisher, I don't care who it is, you're going to have a portfolio of product where some of it is very, very strong, some of it is mediocre, and some of it may not even be that good. We have probably had a larger share of very strong product than most other publishers. Going into 1998, though, we probably have the strongest lineup that

we've had in the history of the company. And this is because in 1997, despite our tremendous successes, we had no sequels in our portfolio. In the entire history of the company we've only ever had five. We're going into 1998 with more than 11 sequels on a multiplatform basis.

NG: One of which is *Deer Hunter 2*. Now there was a game that took a lot of people by surprise ...

Ron: We take a lot of people by surprise

NG: Where did *Deer Hunter* come from?

Ron: *Deer Hunter* came out of our WizardWorks studio, and it was a collaboration with one of our retailers. We just were able to hit upon a lifestyle type of product that was a niche that no one knew existed before. It's not a highly sophisticated product. It's not for the core gamer. It's not a difficult game to get into. It's very simple. And it's priced at below $20.

NG: Could it ever have come from EA?

Ron: No. Nor could it have come from any of the other major studios. It cost us $75,000 to produce. We did it in four months. And it's a hit.

NG: How much money has it made you?

Ron: [Smiles] It's a very successful product. And it's still selling.

NG: What can be learned from *Deer Hunter's* success?

Ron: What we learned from the experience of *Deer Hunter* is that clearly there is a bifurcation of the PC business. You have your hardcore gamer, who while representing 50% of the revenue, are only 5.5 to six million people strong. They are interested in the most sophisticated games, 300MHz computers, 3Dfx cards, etc., and these are the people whom many of our competitors and ourselves are building many of our games for.

But what's been developing is this other 50% of the revenue that's made up of 27 to 30 million casual, mass-market consumers. They may be only purchasing one or two games a year. They don't like highly sophisticated games. They don't want to spend an enormous amount of time reading a manual to learn how to play it. Price points become a lot more important. And oftentimes, licensed products where you already have a pre-established brand become more important.

NG: So that's the PC business. What's going to happen in the console industry over the next couple of years?

Ron: It's an interesting question. We all debate it. Dreamcast will come out next year, and it will be interesting to see how successful it's going to be. We've seen some demonstrations and it's a strong platform. The critical question, and I don't know the answer, is whether or not there will be a next generation of consoles after PlayStation and N64. Does the industry, presumably led by Sony, go straight to a set-top box? This to me is the most interesting issue. Considering the strength of the Intel chips, whereby Christmas of this year we'll see sub-$1,000 computers with 300MHz of power, 3D capability, and the Cirix chip coming out with sub-$400 300MHz computers with 3D capability, what could the next console really be? What could a next generation console offer that will be so dramatically different from the strength that you're getting with that lower-end PC?

NG: That's a very good point. And what about the future of GT?

Ron: First and foremost we will continue to build up our internal studio capability. We have made seven or eight acquisitions over the last two years, and we have integrated those successfully. Additionally, we will continue to build the publishing component of our business, and we will continue to look at different platform opportunities — including Internet and set-top box — and determine how we can become major players on these platforms as well.

The greatest challenge to GT as a company is being able to maintain its growth and at the same time continue to be able to maintain and establish an environment within the company that is attractive and financially motivating for internal talent, and attractive to external talent to come to our company. If we can accomplish that, then everything else will follow.

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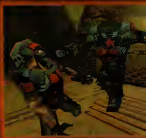
INTELLIGENCE

News of the world as we see it

E3: That was the show that was

After four days of blasting music and alcohol-induced haze,
the industry shapes up for the coming season
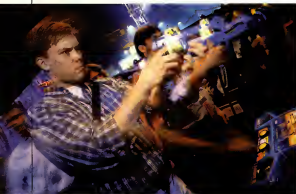
Fear and Loathing in Atlanta — also referred to as E3

DATASTREAM

Approximate cost of Eidos' party at E3: $400,000. Number of copies of *Tomb Raider* Eidos needs to sell to earn $400,000 profit: 50,000. Approximate cost of Sony's booth: $5,000,000. Number of third-party games that must be sold to earn Sony $5,000,000 in licensing fees: 700,000. Number of PlayStation games that can be developed for $5,000,000: 9. Polygons per second on Dreamcast: 3,000,000. On PlayStation: 300,000. On N64: 150,000. On Game Boy: 1.25. On Game Boy Color (theoretically): 2.5.

one notable title. Indeed, the net effect was to overshadow what everyone had expected the big titles to be: *Zelda 64*, *Metal Gear Solid*, and *Unreal*. In any other year, these would have been all anyone talked about. This year, however, attention was pretty finely divided among dozens of titles scattered in the unlikeliest of corners.

Which isn't to say there weren't some clearly definable trends, or a few winners and losers. Nintendo had the single largest booth at the show, and between *Zelda 64*, *Rogue Squadron*, and Game Boy Color, it kept everyone's attention. Nintendo also had the strongest showing among third parties that the former colossus has had in more than three years. Developers appear to at last be coming to grips with the format, and cutting cartridge manufacturing fees earlier this year probably didn't hurt either. Even certain long-delayed titles like *Robotech: Crystal*

The industry's largest trade show can usually be counted on for a lot of hype, a few surprises, and one or two breakout titles. This year's show, however, may go down in history as "the E3 with no buzz" — and strangely, this wasn't a bad thing. In fact, the dominant mood on the show floor was extremely upbeat, as the industry is experiencing a period of record sales and unprecedented growth. There were few publishers and developers who weren't making money, and it showed.

Beyond all the smiles and back slapping, what quickly became apparent was that games this year are also reaching unprecedented levels of quality. Besides a handful of disappointments, practically every booth on the floor sported at least

Dreams appear on the brink of release (though whether this is a plus or a minus is a matter of interpretation). Nintendo's one notable absence at E3? 64DD, which was announced as being "definitely not" for '98 and

The show floor was packed with remarkably high-quality titles

Unreal (top left) cast a long shadow well outside the GT booth, judging by the number of announced titles that use its engine. And what E3 would be complete without a "live" appearance by Lara Croft (above)?

"questionable" for '99 — which is as close to "dead" as we can imagine a system being described.

Sony seemed content to simply tout itself as market leader and point to the sheer volume of PlayStation titles on the floor. *Metal Gear Solid* was certainly one of the major high points of the show, and in general the quality of PlayStation software was impressive, even if the gameplay was somewhat predictable. Indeed, Sony's biggest surprise came the week after the show, when it announced that PlayStation was dropping $20 to an MSRP of $129.99. Nintendo, naturally, followed suit within days.

The "stealth" hits of E3 '98 were clearly Sega and VM Labs. This may have been the show at which Sega unveiled Dreamcast, but you'd never know it looking at the show floor. Sega's buzz was thoroughly behind the scenes, with numerous developers pounding on the door to be the first on the block to see development kits. VM Labs' DVD

connection likewise seduced many, even though it scarcely had any official presence at all. The lack of activity on the surface from both new systems gave them a certain, "I could tell you but then I'd have to kill you" cachet, but in the end, both were among the worst kept secrets of the show.

E3 '98 may have also marked the year that genres began to die. Although many titles continued to be introduced as purely fighting games or first-person shooters, they were all but overshadowed by an astounding number of new games that combine elements of one or more genres — most notably, first-person shooters with RPG elements, and graphic adventures combined with 3D action. It seems that increasingly, developers are aiming to cast the player in a role, then enable them to perform tasks associated with it ("You are a Navy SEAL, and it's up to you to bring down the international terrorists"), rather than giving them

a specific activity and warping the role to fit it ("This fighting game pitches six Navy SEALs against a group of international terrorists").

In the end, E3 '98 offered few surprises, other than the volume of good games on display. The signs are clear that the industry is maturing, and in every sense of the word — 3D gaming conventions are finally catching up to what the hardware is capable of, and companies are starting to respect the growing savvy of the game buying public to recognize substandard product. It would seem that 1999 will be an excellent year indeed. NG

E3 gave the industry's geniuses a soapbox (left), while Howard Lincoln signed a few copies of NG 42 (right)

The best and worst of E3

Next Generation picks out the good, the bad, and the ugly of the year's biggest trade show

This year's E3, like the ones previous, debuted a slew of new and impressive titles. But unlike other shows, the 1998 E3 surround us with a large number of standout titles, as opposed to just a handful — a definite sign of a maturing industry.

Then, of course, there were the disappointments — those talked up titles that just didn't live up to the hype. But as hard as we tried, we only came up with four of these titles out of hundreds of games — and that's a credit to game companies and terrific news for the industry as a whole.

THE BEST

BLACK AND WHITE

PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: LIONHEAD
FORMAT: PC

This first game from the newly formed Lionhead Studio comes straight from the mind of master designer Peter Molyneux. Simply stated, players harness black and white magic in this game that combines aspects of *Populous*, Molyneux's first mainstream hit, with some wartime elements. Most promising is the sophisticated AI that develops strategies based on dynamic studies of player behavior. A great first showing for Lionhead.

BODY HARVEST

PUBLISHER: GT INTERACTIVE
DEVELOPER: DMA
FORMAT: NINTENDO 64

DMA Design's sci-fi epic had a surprising impact on attendees with its impressive visuals and innovative gameplay. Why Nintendo decided to drop the project is utterly confusing, as the game's elegant combination of strategy and action makes it one of the strongest titles in the second generation software lineup.

DRAKAN

PUBLISHER: PSYGNOSIS
DEVELOPER: SURREAL SOFTWARE
FORMAT: PC

Originally previewed in **NG 42** as *Arokh*, this realtime fantasy gamebuster enables players to explore seamlessly woven dungeons and exterior landscapes. The highlights? Utterly organic graphics and the ability to take a trusty fire-breathing dragon to the skies for free-flying combat.

Movers and Shakers

by **Colin Campbell**, *Next Generation*'s international correspondent

HOMEWORLD

**PUBLISHER:** SIERRA STUDIOS
DEVELOPER: RELIC
FORMAT: PC

After a season of clone overload, E3 this year was relatively light on realtime strategy games. Of those present, few stood out as much as newcomer Relic's *Homeworld* (see page 56 for a complete preview). Combat happens in 3D space, and the animation and detail in the game mark it as one of our most anticipated titles of the year.
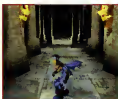
LEGACY OF KAIN: SOUL REAVER

PUBLISHER: TBA
DEVELOPER: CRYSTAL DYNAMICS
FORMAT: PLAYSTATION

Soul Reaver is the only game in Crystal's lineup that doesn't look as if it uses the *Gex* engine, even though it does. The only commonality between this game and the original *Kain* is the setting: the land of Nosgoth. At this early stage, the game already boasts ornate 3D environments that are definitely among the best we've ever seen.

MAX PAYNE

PUBLISHER: GATHERING OF DEVELOPERS
DEVELOPER: 3D REALMS/REMEDY
FORMAT: PC

Another offering from 3D Realms, co-developed by Finnish software house Remedy, *Max Payne* is PC's answer to *GoldenEye*. Hard-hitting action, a fast engine, and tons of 3D Realms' trademark attitude drew a lot of attention from E3 attendees. This should have been the first title to launch Gathering of Developers, rather than *Jazz Jackrabbit 2*.

METAL GEAR SOLID

PUBLISHER: KONAMI
DEVELOPER: KONAMI
FORMAT: PLAYSTATION

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, this is simply the PlayStation game to beat in 1998. It's got action, strategy, and a truly cinematic feel, and anyone can pick it up and start playing in five minutes. On the other hand, along with *Spyro the Dragon*, *Metal Gear* serves as a sign of the system's aging technology. It can't get much better than this on PlayStation.

Among gaming's warriors

Happiness is a hardware war. The more delightfully dirty, the more beautifully acrimonious, the better. And in Sony, Nintendo, and Sega we have all the elements of a lovely backbiting, bitching classic. But not just yet. For now, it's maneuvers and logistics.

Traditionally, on the day before E3, the game industry's horrible hackpack shuttles between hotels to take its place in hardware manufacturers' press conferences. This year, the three proved that their current position in the marketplace is in direct disproportion to the level of fun to be had at their particular conferences.

Sony's meeting was a sober affair dominated by Kaz Hirai's impressively convincing rundown of the hard numbers. PlayStation has more users, more games, more everything. In general, Hirai didn't bother

matter of actual games. For that we grabbed a cab and headed for Nintendo.

Peter Main and Howard Lincoln took the stage in front of a crowd numbering perhaps 10 times more than the one gathered at Sony's get-together. But while Sony's thing was just going through the motions, the church of Nintendo took its rituals seriously.

Nintendo's charismatic pitch focused on games, and we were treated to extended previews of *Zelda*, *Twelve Tales*, and *Banjo-Kazooie*. There were also glimpses of *Jet Force Gemini* and *Perfect Dark*.

And then Lincoln reached the zenith of his performance. On came "the poet of videogames," Shigeru Miyamoto. The crowd erupted and showed its love. We clapped and wept with joy. Some journalists near me

Sony's meeting was a sober affair dominated by Kaz Hirai's impressively **convincing** rundown of the **hard numbers**

much with a high profile, which is our loss. There was little in the way of snide jibes against the competition and much in reasoned, logical argument. Hirai was gracious in victory and serious in intent.

Phil Harrison was relieved to have something to focus on during his presentation. Instead of not answering pointless questions about PlayStation 2, he displayed an engaging enthusiasm for that little PDA thingy and was only forced to retreat into the now classic, "We have no such plans at this time" zone on one or two occasions.

Otherwise, it was a genteel performance singularly lacking in much talk about the small

started babbling in tongues, though it may just have been that they were from the Czech Republic or Brazil or some such place. Miyamoto said the usual stuff about creating fantasy worlds to play in, and (this next bit may be fanciful, my memory is hazy) there came a brilliant light, and some angels appeared and lifted him skywards to the sound of a thousand harps.

Nintendo is all about *Zelda*. Cleverly, Lincoln pointed out that N64 had been shafted by *Final Fantasy VII*. The subtext is that Sony sold hardware on the back of Square's adventure — so guess what's going to happen when *Zelda* arrives, particularly in Japan. ▶

Two hours before, I'd been sold on Sony's supremacy. But now it didn't seem so obvious. Perhaps it would become clear at Sega's shindig.

If Sony's scene was the cane and tails and first-class good manners of game society's elite, Sega's was all Irish jigs and bawdy jokes and good, honest ale.

Some 500 people made their way to the Fox Theater to see Dreamcast and to hear Bernie Stolar. "Saturday Night Live" news guy Kevin Nealon delivered a skit, which included

As that spaceship thing bobbed its way through a polygonal universe, we all realized that this was for real. A new game platform is among us. Oh, happy happy days

E3: the last word
One thing in plentiful supply at E3 were reporters in agreement that the show had nothing new. This was a true and fair assessment, in that just about everything on show was already known about. Surprises don't happen at E3 anymore.

The reason is not that the

And then it happened. As Bernie left the stage, the screen filled with images of a shooting game unlike any other

self-deprecating jokes about Sega's failures. Already, the difference between Sega and its opponents was becoming clear.

All three companies inspire different emotions. For Sony it's respect. For Nintendo it's admiration. For Sega, right there in that sweet old theater, it was something strange and unfamiliar. I felt affection.

Bernie Stolar began talking about Dreamcast. His public manner was in harmony with his reputation as a personable man who talks straight and gets things done. Everything he said was good and exciting, but disappointingly, not much of what he said was actual news. The development partners were announced, the marketing plans were unveiled, and the tech specs were touched upon. As he wrapped up, I began to feel that something was missing.

And then it happened. As Bernie left the stage, the screen filled with images of a shooting game looking unlike any other. Dreamcast may have a crappy name. Sega may have a patchy past. But what we saw right there was all it took.

industry has lost its ability to make new things — it just doesn't try to bring them on with fanfare anymore. This is a good thing. The rise of online news has made it virtually impossible for companies to keep secrets. Publicists have wisely realized that, and instead of fighting the forces of information, their best policy is to take advantage of the status quo by releasing news in a more even fashion.

The result is that going into E3, we know roughly what to expect, and we can make judgments based on actually playing games we've already been briefed to expect. Time was when every company had some suspense at the show. But it all blurred into one. The exercise was a case of diminishing returns. Better that the public knows what's going on in advance, instead of being forced to process tons of new data in the space of just three days. E3 may not have the shock value of yesteryear, but it's still a mad and invigorating party of everything that's so bloody great about this business

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DUTCAST
PUBLISHER: OCEAN
DEVELOPER: APPEAL
FORMAT: PC

Outcast is the personification of diligence. Along with Trespasser, Ocean's epic adventure testifies to the fact that focused programming yields amazing results. If the final package delivers the quality adventure promised by the company, Outcast could become the latest high watermark for game design.

PERFECT DARK
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: RARE
FORMAT: NINTENDO 64

Nintendo may no longer own Agent 007, but anyone who has played Goldeneye knows it won't take Bond to make the next iteration of Rare's first-person engine something to get excited about. Rare's new hero, Joanna Dark, is more "X-Files" than Her Majesty's Secret Service. Promising more ingenious gadgetry and ferocious enemies, this, more than any other N64 title, brings with it great expectations.

PLAYMOBILE ADVENTURES
PUBLISHER: UBI SOFT
DEVELOPER: UBI SOFT
FORMAT: PC

The biggest surprise at the show may have been Ubi Soft's series of three cutesy action/adventures based on the Playmobile toy license. Not only are the graphics crisp and bright, but the gameplay, camera, and control are all dead-on. They may not outsell Unreal, but anyone interested in how to do an action/adventure right should pick these games up.

PREY: A TALON BRAVE ADVENTURE
**PUBLISHER: GT INTERACTIVE**
DEVELOPER: 3D REALMS
FORMAT: PC

Something had to grab the title of "first-person game to watch for next," and while the field is crowded, Prey has come out on top. Featuring 3D Realms' new portal-based engine, spectacular lighting effects, and a story that actually matters, Prey will fight it out with Quake 3 for the chance to unseat Unreal next year.

RAYMAN 2

PUBLISHER: UBI SOFT
DEVELOPER: UBI SOFT
FORMAT: PC

Rayman, the cute being without legs or arms (but with hands and feet), is back, and in 3D. From what we saw, this may be the best 3D implementation of a 2D hero since Mario. On PC, with accelerated graphics, the game looks visually stunning. Behind the scenes, rumors were flying that Rayman was headed to at least one of the next generation systems.
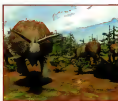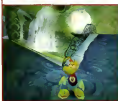
TRESPASSER

PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: DREAMWORKS
FORMAT: PC

Not unlike Grigan's quest, the player's mission is to get off Spielberg's dinosaur-infested island. From a first-person perspective, players must solve a number of puzzles and avoid numerous prehistoric predators. With in-depth adventure elements and real-world physics models, this is no "Quake with dinosaurs." The graphics are, as befits Jurassic Park, stunning.

SPYRO THE DRAGON

PUBLISHER: SCEA
DEVELOPER: INSOMNIAC GAMES
FORMAT: PLAYSTATION

As the youthful dragon Spyro, players explore a wacky and colorful 3D world, not unlike that in Mario. While it's basically a platformer, the solid gameplay is built around interaction with enemy characters. Spyro can glide, spit flame, and charge his enemies. Sony has rightfully put a lot of attention on this title and its main character.

ZELDA

PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: NINTENDO
FORMAT: NINTENDO 64

Nintendo games are always so heavily anticipated, it's almost impossible for them not to let us down a little. With Zelda, though, it looks as if Nintendo has again done the impossible. The game looks to actually exceed our high expectations, taking Link and company into 3D with enough innovations in technology and gameplay to impress even the most jaded gamer.

THE LETDOWNS

C: THE CONTRA ADVENTURE

PUBLISHER: KONAMI
DEVELOPER: APPALOOSA
FORMAT: PLAYSTATION

Once a must-have game for NES, Konami has taken the name of this great side-scrolling shooter and has continued to devalue it by slapping it on marginal product after marginal product. It may have been wiser to release a retro pack rather than this update. Interestingly, "contra" means "against" in Spanish, and frankly, we're against this one.

DAIKATANA

PUBLISHER: EIDOS
DEVELOPER: ION STORM
FORMAT: PC

With more hype than a Jim Carrey movie, Daikatana failed to create a buzz in Atlanta. The fact is, Ion Storm's effort to build an all new experience from the Quake engine is quite possibly its largest downfall. It's tough to get around the fact that this engine is two years old and looks it. Luckily, Ion Storm's other offerings looked great and showed a lot more promise.

TOMB RAIDER III

PUBLISHER: EIDOS
DEVELOPER: CORE
PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION/PC

Whither Lara Croft? TRII is basically TRI with a crop of new levels: same engine (a few tweaks aside), same game structure. That worked for TRI — barely — but with the bold advances in 3D engines in the last year and a half, especially on PC, this game is looking very, very behind. Showgoers didn't spend too much time with this before wandering off.

VIGILANCE

PUBLISHER: SEGASOFT
DEVELOPER: POSTLINEAR/ANYCHANNEL
FORMAT: PC

Perhaps the most important title for SegaSoft, Vigilance unfortunately shows signs of being either too ambitious or not ambitious enough. Some showgoers compared it unfavorably to Sony's Syphon Filter. Slow frame rate and nagging control problems were a few of the detractions that kept it from looking good in comparison to similar games on the show floor.

Two-time Oscar-nominated director, producer, and writer David Lynch has begun work on a game titled Woodcutters From Fiery Ships. Lynch is responsible for Blue Velvet, Wild at Heart, and The Elephant Man. Lynch's company SubStation is working with Synergy Inc., the publisher and distributor of EA games in Japan. No format or U.S. publisher has been announced (we're guessing PC), but the game is planned for release in the fall of 1999.

While Origin continues to support Ultima Online, a new, tentatively titled Ultima Online: Gold Edition is in the works. The key features include new places and dungeons to explore, with 50% additional playable land mass. The terrain has been designed to encourage player-made cities, and ranges from jungles to rivers to mountains to lost temples. Of course, the new terrain will be populated by new creatures, including Cyclopes, Ice Serpents, Snakemen, and Spider People. Interface upgrades include optional player profiles and an IRC-style chat system. Beta test is likely to begin in late summer, with a fall release.

Sources indicate the forward-scrolling shooter that Sega briefly displayed during its E3 Dreamcast launch announcement will be a pack-in with the system. Developed internally at Sega of America's Redwood City office, it will be one of the expected eight to 12 titles available for Dreamcast at launch.

Simon & Schuster Interactive is developing a PlayStation game based on Douglas Adams' Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy. The game's release will coincide with Disney's upcoming live-action film adaptation of the Hitchhikers series of novels. The game and film are set for release in late 1999.

Software partnership
comes together for VM Labs

Dang, boy!

Several months ago, VM Labs disclosed the hardware strategy behind Project X, leaving the most obvious questions about software unanswered. At E3, Next Generation caught up with Richard Miller, CEO of VM Labs, and got some answers.

First, we asked him about launch titles. "It looks at this point as if we'll have as many titles as there were for any other console launch," said Miller. "I think we'll easily have at least six titles at launch." The developers behind those titles come from a license list that includes Activision, MGM, Capcom, Fox Interactive, Hasbro, THQ, and Psygnosis. "We're really getting a tremendous response from developers," said Miller. "It's actually going quite a bit better than we expected." Miller went on to note that the announced developer's list is far from complete, although he declined to speculate on the plans of major third parties like Electronic Arts and Namco.

According to Miller, developers are responding positively to VM Labs' hardware strategy, which eschews a dedicated polygon pipeline in favor of massive computational power. "There are a lot of great titles out there that use polygons and we're going to have great polygon performance, but there's life beyond polygons as well, and the key to the next generation

Demos (right) show the graphic potential of the system (above). The raytracing demo (bottom) proves that nonpolygon engines are a viable option

of new titles is to give the power back to developers, give them the flexibility and the raw horsepower to create new and different gameplay and video effects," said Miller. "Let them do what they want."

Given the recent emergence of games that favor software rendering over hardware (for instance, Trespasser and Outcast), it appears that VM Labs' unique design approach and business model may prove successful. Next Generation recently saw demos of three graphic technologies running on Project X hardware: a polygon demo (by the Iron Soldier team Eclipse), an early voxel demo by Animatronics, and the latest rev of Jeff Minter's Tempest 3000 demo, which, predictably, featured per-pixel handcoded effects. The demos also showed VM Labs' mastery of the NTSC screen. Next Generation has rarely seen such flicker-free still images — even wireframes. Based on the demos we saw, we are confident that if developers make the effort, excellent and unique results can be generated by the hardware.

Expect, at least in Japan, for Project X to ship in a PlayStation-style DVD player

TALKBACK
An irregular look inside the heads of some of the world's leading designers

NG: When will we see Lylat on N64, other than in Mario Kart?

Shigeru Miyamoto: I have Lylat running around with Mario on my development system in my office right now. I don't know whether or not he'll be in the next game, but I would like him to be

Odds of landing this move: 10 to 1.

Odds of fathering children afterwards: 1,000,000 to 1.

MOTOCROSS MADNESS

Start the madness at www.microsoft.com/games/motocross

Sick stunts and even sicker crashes. 16 get-some-serious-air stunts, like the outrageous Heel Clicker and insane Nac-Nac. Loads of notify-your-next-of-kin wipeouts. Either way you land it, you're a crowd favorite.

What makes a phat ride? Physics. Separate physics models for rider and bike mean you can pull wheelies out of the gate, dive into hairpin turns, and showboat during your Big Kahuna stunt (as if the Big Kahuna ain't showboaty enough).

Choose a track. Or not. Over 30 tracks, including Supercross, Nationals, Baja, and the dreaded Stunt Quarry, plus off-track terrain that's so hairy you may find yourself saying, "Track? What track?"

Boredom is a four-letter word. You'll constantly admire the mind-messingly photorealistic environment, whether you're face-down in the dirt or 20 feet in the air. And keep it all fresh with a built-in track editor and 8-person multiplayer capability.

Motocross Madness™ requires a 3-D card.

Microsoft

Dreamcast: Performance details emerge

NG has seen the system in action

At an exclusive E3 demonstration, **Next Generation** had a chance to test-drive Dreamcast. Our first impression? Amazing.

The most impressive part of the actual hardware is the controller — it's practically as large as the system itself and has a port for two expansion packs. Currently, the Visual Memory System, a PDA/back-up cart, is the only announced controller pack. The controller features analog and digital control (both active at the same time), and Sega claims the analog feedback features 30 times the sample rate of the N64 controller, which would make it far more accurate than either Sony or Nintendo's analog sticks. In addition to the start button and four control buttons, the controller has two triggers. In an impressive innovation, the triggers are analog as well, making them ideal for use as gas pedals in racing games, or for moderating shot intensity in sports games. The number of game innovations enabled by the controller alone is impressive: One can easily imagine choosing sports plays in private on the VMS screen or playing mini VMS games incorporated into RPGs. Also, the analog triggers should add a great deal to action and sports games.

The base unit itself is very small, about two-thirds the width of a PlayStation, with four controller ports and an expansion port/phone jack on the back. The development system can output a pure analog RGB signal, but it is not known if the production unit will have that capability.

Sega says that web surfing will not be a priority for the modem-equipped system, but sources tell **Next Generation** that an Internet Explorer CD will be included. One thing that will be a priority is multiplayer gaming. Sega plans to have an online, multiplayer game ready at launch, as well as a gaming service. Whether it will offer only simple matching or a more full-featured gaming service is unknown at this time, as is the Internet strategy, although we assume an official ISP will be announced soon.

Graphically, the system is amazing. In demos that Sega says were written in less than six weeks, the level of detail and pure polygon pushing was around the level of Voodoo² graphics, and this was on hardware that Sega says is running at only around 50% power. All expected tricks were supported, including per-pixel anisotropic filtering and bump-mapping. The system is capable of outputting more than 3,000,000 fully featured polygons per second (compare with 1,000,000bps on a Model 3 arcade board). Because the Hitachi SH-4 processor is optimized for 3D-intensive floating-point calculations, it can easily outperform a 400MHz Pentium 2. Although the maximum resolution is 640x480 (640x240 at 60fps), an HDTV Dreamcast could output at up to 1600x1200 pixels, according to sources at PowerVR. The APIs included with the Sega OS are designed to be familiar to experienced Sega developers, but SGL-derived APIs, as well as OpenGL and Direct X APIs, will also be available.

The OS, either Sega's "close to the metal" proprietary offering, or Windows CE, is read off each CD, which enables easy OS (and importantly, DirectX API) updates. While some worry that this could increase load times, the custom CD interface (controlled, interestingly enough, by the PowerVR chip, not the SH-4) is lightning fast, enabling "three-second load times for apps," according to a source at PowerVR.

So far, so good. Now we want to see games, not demos, running. Check back for more next month. NG

Although the controllers and VMS cards shown so far have been red, they will actually ship in a variety of colors

VF 3 hasn't been confirmed, but Dreamcast can push three times the polygons of the Model 3

Arcadia

by Marcus Webb, editor of RePlay magazine

The Sega saga

As of press time, there was still no official word about the long-expected major organizational shake-up at Sega GameWorks. Long-whispered rumors that Sega would purchase its core-op sales and marketing division back from the rest of the GameWorks joint venture partners (DreamWorks and MCA, Inc.) finally broke into the European trade press late last spring. But Sega executives here maintained a firm "no comment" stance on the whole subject.

The factory's official line is that the new Naomi com-op system will debut "sometime around fall" ... and is hinting that this debut will actually take place at the AMOA Expo, a trade show set for September in Nashville. Also officially confirmed is that third-party suppliers will be encouraged to participate in providing arcade software for Naomi. Capcom

filed for Chapter 11 last January, with the express purpose of pushing mall landlords to lower rent prices for hundreds of mall-based arcades in this nationwide chain. NCI President Kevin Hayes says his company filed a Plan of Reorganization with the federal bankruptcy court last May, calling for NCI to pay all creditors to the tune of 100 cents on the dollar.

"This is a first step toward NCI emerging from Chapter 11 status," Hayes stated. "Our plan must be reviewed by our creditors and approved by the court, but we don't expect any objections since we are going to pay everyone in full ... We expect NCI to be out of Chapter 11 by the end of August."

The Namco operating empire in the U.S. now stands at 346 mall arcades and 174 retail

and Konami are the two names most prominently mentioned in this connection.

Namco arcades move to exit Chapter 11

As reported in a previous edition of Arcadia, America's largest arcade chain, Namco Cybertainment, Inc. (headquartered near Chicago),

type locations (hotels, movie theaters, etc.) for a combined total of more than 500 sites nationwide. That's down a bit from before the Chapter 11 declaration, but not much. (By the way, Namco's two Magic Edge simulation centers in both Japan and Northern California also remain open as of this writing.)

Expect major organizational changes at Sega GameWorks to take place in the coming months

GameWorks now an arcade
Studios for hardcore fans

The one thing Sega Enterprises, Universal Studios, and DreamWorks SKG did not want you to do when they opened their first GameWorks last year was call it an arcade. You could call the 30,000-square-foot, 200-game-machine establishment an "adult hangout" or the "latest evolution in entertainment," but one mention of the "A" word, and the DreamWorks police shot you a frosty glare.

Now, however, no one gets upset when you call the latest GameWorks, located in City of Industry, California, an arcade. That's because it's a GameWorks Studio, a new concept that requires one-third the space of a regular GameWorks and has half the number of games.

GameWorks Studios an an arcade-goer's dream! Many of the games were released in the last six months, and all of them are brand

new and big. Like deluxe games? GameWorks Studio has two Namco *Rapid Rivers*, two Sega *Lost Worlds*, a five-player Daytona, a two-player Motocross Go, and many more deluxe machines. All of these games are housed in theme areas with crazy designs. The driving games are in the "Garage," a room with tools on the walls and dozens of mufflers hanging from the ceiling. The "Surf Shack" has two Sega Wave Runners sticking out of the side of a VW van, and the "Half Court" area has sports and shooting games, along with brick walls and a chain link fence.

GameWorks Studio is one of the cheapest arcades in the greater Los Angeles area. Customers can pay for their games on an individual basis or purchase a one-hour unlimited play card for $10 or a two-hour card for $15.

This month in
game history

Sources **Next Generation Online** and Don Thomas' IC when (http://www.kssoftware.com/cywhen)

100% PURE

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10 OZ.

GRADE
A

NFL XTREME.™ A HIGH-SCORING, 5-ON-5, IN-YOUR-FACE, GRIDIRON WAR. THERE'S NO RULES, NO PENALTIES AND NO BOUNDARIES. IT'S A HELMET-POPPING, TRASH-TALKING, LATE-HITTING FREE-FOR-ALL. ENJOY.

LET THEM EAT

20 ways to Annihilate Alien Trash...
A merciless Motherload of all-new Weapons!

Blast the past in the Wild West,
The Dark Ages, and Imperial Rome!

It's Sudden Death on all sides in all
single-player and two-player massive levels!

Girls Girls Girls

Travel through time in an all-new Nukem frag-fest exclusively for the PlayStation game console.
In this revolutionary third-person shooter Duke annihilates ancient Rome, conquers the Dark Ages, tames the Wild West
and fights up L.A., proving once more that the only good alien is a dead one! With a colossal arsenal of high-tech,
all-new weapons and more Nukem attitude and humor than ever before, TIME TO KILL gives you more of what you crave.
More hard-core action! More exploration! More shooter mayhem! More of the King of Carnage!

THE
CONSOLE

WARS OF

1999

PlayStation

THE STORY SO FAR:

Sony's first attempt to get into the game business was in 1989, when the company folded an MSX-compatible PC. After the failure of the proposed standard, Sony tried again, and the result was the infamous Super NES CD-ROM "partnership" with Nintendo that collapsed just one day after it was announced during the summer 1991 CES. Sony refused to quit, and the third by produced PlayStation. The 32 game machine's design, by Ken Kutaragi (whose previous accomplishments included designing the Super NES sound chip), was as elegant as it was powerful, and for the time, it was amazingly powerful. Launched in the U.S. on September 9, 1995, PlayStation quickly grabbed the number one spot among consoles, and it has yet to budge. Sony's spot-on marketing and excellent 3D games gave it an instant "cool" cachet that it has yet to lose, and PlayStation now makes up a significant portion of Sony's annual revenue.

HARDWARE:

As powerful as the hardware was at release, delivering 3D performance at levels that computers 20 times its

$299 cost couldn't, PlayStation's specs seem almost quaint today: 300,000 polygons per second, a 30MIPS processor, 4MB RAM, and 2MB VRAM. Still, many of the features PlayStation pioneered, like removable memory cards, are now standard, and hardware innovation at the accessory level continues, with the Dual Shock controller and recent experience stores memory card PDA leading the way. It's a testament to the quality and foresight of the design that four years after the specs were hammered out, top-quality arcade games like Rakkee 3 can still be successfully converted to the system. However, there is simply no denying that PlayStation is starting to show its age. While developers continue to squeeze everything they can from the system, there is just not enough texture memory or RAM to make games that can compete with even mediocre efforts on PC.

SOFTWARE:

There's certainly enough software for PlayStation — more than 400 titles in the U.S. — but quality has always been an issue. Software has constantly improved technologically, but the ratio of five-star games to also-rans has remained consistent. As the most popular console, PlayStation is the lowest common denominator for many developers, and popular genres like racing and third-person action are crowded. The size of the market, however, also ensures that PlayStation is the prime location for niche titles like Monster Rancher or PaRappa. Although technological quality has improved with each generation of software, there are signs that this is changing: Games like Spyro the Dragon reveal the limited number of polygons available to developers. Also, this 32, unlike last year's, featured few games that look as if they will be a significant leap beyond what is available today. We expect to see the high-quality routines from games like Gran Turismo filter down to lesser developers, and gameplay and design

advances should continue. But even with assembly programming, there doesn't seem to be a lot more for PlayStation to give.

MARKETING:

On the marketing side, however, SCEA is nowhere near finished. Despite a nearly 50% penetration in U.S. homes, the company, which is close to dominating the traditional target audience (adolescent boys), has only begun to fight. Sony's marketing, on the whole, has always been excellent, with print, TV, and point-of-purchase precisely addressing the target audience. When PlayStation launched, that target was 17- to 24-year-old men. Today that age range is significantly lower, and the company is starting to reach out to the Holy Grail of the game industry, women. It has the software to do it — games like PaRappa and Spyro are well-received by most women, and if it can succeed with this group, the console's life span should be considerably lengthened. With both software and hardware (the PDA), Sony is making a legitimate and successful attempt to expand its market.

Gran Turismo's high-res mode demonstrates the quality of graphics that PlayStation can attain with assembly programming

The Dual Shock controller has better feedback than the Rumble Pak and two very nice analog control sticks — a sure hit

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For the first time in videogame history, the next generation of consoles is set to release before the previous generation dies. What are the implications? A **Next Generation** report

Every popular entertainment business, from movies to TV to amusement parks, has slumps, but the game industry's cyclical history of dramatic highs followed by catastrophic lows has been unique. Other fads seem to rise and fall once — drive-in movies, for instance — but nothing else has risen, fallen, and risen again as often, or as powerfully, as games.

The end to the slumps has always come on the back of new hardware: When Nintendo released the NES in 1985, the videogame

industry was considered dead. In 1989, when Sega introduced Genesis, NES was rapidly approaching the end of its creative life (although Inertia kept sales going until the mid-'90s). And when PlayStation arrived, both Genesis and Super NES featured increasingly dated gameplay on increasingly expensive cartridges.

1999 will be a different story. When Sega's Dreamcast and VM Labs' Project X-compatible machines are released, both Sony and Nintendo will be actively selling present

generation hardware and software — in fact, they should have banner years. It is hard to see either PlayStation or Nintendo 64 bowing out before the turn of the century; Sony VP Phil Harrison says he expects PlayStations to still be available at retail in the U.S. in a decade. Optimistic, maybe, but there's no denying that the line between current and next generation systems is becoming blurred.

Will PlayStation and Nintendo 64 be able to compete with the likes of Dreamcast and Project X, or will they be blown away by the

COMPETITIVE ANALYSIS:

The harsh reality is that if you are multiple versions of a game, particularly if one is on an accelerated PC, the PlayStation version tends to look the worst. PlayStation-exclusive games, designed around the system's foibles, look better, but they still have swimming, grainy textures. The PlayStation's main advantages today are that it's cheap, it has well-designed and well-integrated components, and some of its exclusive titles, Gran Turismo for one, are among the best games around. And the other main advantage? There are so million PlayStations in North American homes, making it — limitations or not — first choice for most developers.

THE COMPANY LINE:

Sony's motto is E3 was "PlayStation Forever." Is that possible? Phil Harrison, VP of R&D and third-party relations, says: "Generational cycles in game hardware are self-fulfilling prophecies, which the industry brings upon itself. In the past developers have been forced to abandon existing systems for the promise of new technology and business models because the current formats were dying a horrible death. This not going to happen to PlayStation for very good reasons — we planned the format from day one to be future-proof." But what about the game? Can Sony compete without the best hardware? "Since the day Ridge Racer shipped, the naysayers have

claimed we've hit the maximum performance of the PlayStation. They said it again with Tekken, again with Formula, and so on. But every time, something new and more exciting has come along, which shows even greater performance on PlayStation. This is a unique situation for the industry to be in. With 16-bit, toward the end of its life, developers used bigger and more expensive carts, which delivered only the most marginal increase in quality, so the perceived value to the gamer went down. With PlayStation, though, the CDs always cost the same, and in fact, as the installed base grows, costs go down. The PlayStation format is the first to deliver decreasing software prices and increasing quality. That's a much better long-term value for the gamer." OK, but will there be PlayStation development in 10 years? "I'll say this: PlayStation is only available in the U.S., Japan, and Europe. We're just getting into Asia while China and

South America remain untapped. They also represent some of the fastest-growing consumer economies in the world. I think it's very likely we'll see development for years to come."

FUTURE PROGNOSIS:

PlayStation is here to stay — it's hit the critical mass it needs to be a "permaconsole," and in the same way Super NES is still available, we expect PlayStation to be around, if not forever, at least for the next few years. The real question is this: How much longer will truly great software be produced on PlayStation? No matter how large the installed base is, at a certain point the best teams will want to move on to bigger and better things, and the best games will go too. Specialty publishers like THQ will stray around a while longer, but the machine will become irrelevant to hardcore gamers long before the last game is released. At last year's E3, ambitious titles like Metal Gear Solid were shown even though they would not be delivered for more than 12 months. That was not the case this year, and we do not expect many top development teams to undertake more than another one or two PlayStation projects.

BOTTOM LINE:

PlayStation has a huge installed base and proven third-party momentum, not to mention a marketing team devoted to broadening its appeal. The system isn't going anywhere, but it is hard to envision software continuing to improve much past this holiday season. Next Generation expects soon to witness the start of PlayStation's decline. Just how rapid that decline will be remains to be seen.

Tekken 3 was a very successful conversion, but can Tekken 4 be done on five-year-old hardware?

Will PlayStation and Nintendo 64 be able to compete with the likes of Dreamcast and Project X?

massive power of the next generation systems? It's a question weighing on the minds of the leaders of the industry. "Everything is going so good right now, with PlayStation as the kind of de facto standard and Nintendo as the alternative that keeps [Sony] from acting too monopolistic. I'm worried about any change at all," said one high-profile PlayStation developer to Next Generation at E3. "I'm worried that Dreamcast is going to screw everything up."

Given that previous generational changes have been characterized by precipitous drops in both sales and game quality, that developer has a reason to be worried. 1997 was a record year for the game industry, and 1998 should be as well — no one wants to see that change in 1999 or beyond

And it isn't just people involved with the console business who are worried. The PC game market has traditionally been immune to events in the console world. But now, many

newcomers to PC gaming are console gamers in their late teens and 20s who "grow up" from consoles to more mature games on PC, either when they get to college or later, when they get jobs that enable them to afford PCs. Clearly, any fallout from the arrival of the next generation systems will affect the entire industry.

So, will the introduction of Dreamcast and Project X systems next year herald another crash in the console (and PC) game market? In a word, no. That's because the situation in 1998 is unique in the history of the game industry, and the transition to the next generation of consoles will also be unique. This isn't to say that there won't be a major shake-

Nintendo 64

THE STORY SO FAR:

Nintendo first announced its "Project Reality" console, hardware by SGI, in August 1993. After numerous name changes and delays, Nintendo 64 finally shipped in the U.S. in September 94, 1996. Despite the long development cycle, one thing that never wavered was Nintendo's commitment to the cartridge format. Although carts turned off many third parties, Nintendo didn't seem to care: it was confident that it could succeed on the quality of first-party software alone. And for the most part, it has. While some third parties (notably Acclaim and Midway) have made significant contributions to the system's library, N64's success has tracked neatly with the quality of first- and second-party releases. Despite PlayStation's head start, Nintendo 64 sold exceptionally well until the last holiday season, when a lack of software enabled PlayStation to firmly cement its lead. Still, most N64 software, especially first-party software, dramatically outsells comparable efforts on PlayStation.

HARDWARE:

N64 is based on the same technology as SGI's $50,000 Reality engine. Although that was cutting edge in 1993, today it would be hard-pressed to keep up with Voodoo². But the biggest hardware limitation on N64 right now isn't raw performance, it's memory. The system only has 4MB of RAM, and the cart format limits the number of textures. 64DD should have alleviated both of these problems (it was to come with a 2MB RAM expansion pack and store up to 64MB of data on a disk), but its release in the U.S. now seems doubtful. Nintendo pioneered the analog digital stick (a concept shamelessly stolen by its competitors) and continues to innovate with controller pack add-ons like the Rumble Pak, as well as a proposed speech-recognition unit. The ability to alter the microcode of the MIPS processor means that N64 engineers will be able to continue to improve performance for a while, but without the RAM expansion pack, developers will be unable to fully capitalize on the microcode improvements.

The sheer number of add-ons planned by Nintendo, from video-grabbers to speech-recognition controller packs, demonstrates Nintendo's dedication to expanding the market beyond just games

SOFTWARE:

Nintendo never intended to compete in quantity of games, but in its first year, the company and more spectacularly, third parties, failed to deliver on the quality promise (with certain notable exceptions like Mario and Wave Race). Since then, the quality of most titles has improved, as developers have come to terms with the difficulty of developing for the system. Still, the limited number of third parties means that much of the system's fate lies with Nintendo and second-party Rare. When Nintendo and Rare deliver high-quality software, interest in the system increases. If high-quality software isn't delivered on time (like Zelda), interest wanes. Third-party software delivery rates are increasing, especially as cart prices decrease, but ultimately, N64 is all about Nintendo's software.

MARKETING:

Although Nintendo's marketing has never really appealed to Next Generation aesthetically, there's no arguing with the results. Nintendo has the most loyal fans in the business, it gets the most mainstream press, and it has fantastic retailer relationships. The company has focused on the younger age groups, and although it is successful there, 10-year-old boys are becoming a smaller and smaller segment of the market. It's unlikely that Nintendo is going to be marginalized in the U.S. anytime soon, but it's difficult to appeal to older gamers when the marketing and games are aimed at children. This is a challenge Nintendo will face through 1998 and 1999.

COMPETITIVE ANALYSIS:

Despite an increase in third-party titles in 1998, Nintendo has suffered against Sony this year, largely because the company has failed to ship the kind of awesome first-party titles gamers have come to expect. A danger in Nintendo's "quality, not quantity"

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up or a redistribution in market share. It is to say, however, that the game industry has reached a level of critical mass sufficient to ensure that, barring colossal mistakes on the part of more than one first party, a crash on the order of magnitude of the 1983 disaster is highly unlikely. To understand why, both previous generational changes and the state of the industry today must be explored.

The pre-2600 "TV games," like Pong and its clones, sold well on novelty alone — it was cool to be able to play games on your TV. But with only four or so games per console, it was hard not to tire of them eventually. The Atari 2600 wasn't the first console to offer an expandable library of games — that honor went to the Fairchild Channel F — but it was the first to succeed commercially, thus establishing the guiding principles that exist today: A console should be inexpensive and easy to use, it should exist in the living room on the TV, and it should be as powerful as a home PC but dedicated entirely to entertainment. In fact, peril has come to systems, from 3DO to CD-i to Saturn, that have strayed from that creed. Despite its successful strategy, the 2600 ultimately failed for two major reasons. First, despite bad purchases by adults, the 2600 was used mostly by children. Second, Atari implemented little (some say no) quality-control procedures.

With NES, introduced in 1985 at the nadir of the videogame industry, Nintendo addressed the quality problem by enforcing

NES was still marketed to children, and Nintendo apparently failed to realize that videogames might appeal to anyone older than 12

DMA's *Body Harvest* is one of a wave of third-party games that demonstrate that outside developers are finally getting a handle on N64

strategy is that without big first party titles, gamers look elsewhere. Chairman Howard Lincoln acknowledged that at E3 this year, but contended that *Zelda*, scheduled to ship in November, would have the same kind of invigorating effect on Nintendo that a major hit move has on a studio in the doldrums. He's right, but the opposite is true as well: if Nintendo fails to deliver *Zelda* on time, or if *Perfect Dark* slips, both games and developers could quickly lose interest in the system.

THE COMPANY LINE:

Nintendo absolutely can't afford another holiday season without a real marquee title. But might *Zelda* slip again? Lincoln says: "I'm quite confident that we're not going to have any delay problems with *Zelda*. I mean, you know, Mr. Miyamoto knows and we all know that [*Zelda*] is a critical title and it's a critical date for release, November 25. I have a high degree of confidence that it's going to ship on time." And what about third-party software? "I think it's getting better. I'm encouraged. I think, particularly in the sports arena, the kind of quality of football games that Acclaim, EA, and Midway are bringing out, I think that's positive. I think there is some other third-party software that looks really outstanding too, for example, *Turok 2*. So I think that it is improving overall and that there is some exceptional

third-party software that will help us in the back half of '98."

FUTURE PROGNOSIS:

N64 is in an interesting position. Technologically, there is a lot more that can be done with the system. If Nintendo and Rare can continue to deliver high-quality games, Nintendo's marketing should keep gamers loyal to the system, providing a ready market for third parties well into 1999 and beyond. Nintendo has never rushed to enter the next generation battle, and despite N64's failure in Japan, we don't expect them to this time either. With two major unannounced games, *Metroid 64* and *Mario 2*, supported by two Rare games, the company could easily keep gamers playing on N64 beyond 1999. If, however, Nintendo

fails to deliver major games, loyalty to the system could shrivel quickly. There is only so long even the most patient fans will wait, and Nintendo's dismal on-time record doesn't exactly inspire confidence. Still, the company knows what it has to do. Whether or not it can do it is another question.

BOTTOM LINE:

Nintendo 64's support is a mile wide and an inch deep. If any major titles slip, it could spell an early doom for the system. Third-party support will largely depend on Nintendo's ability to keep gamers excited about the system. If all goes well, Nintendo will be able to introduce a new system on its own schedule early in the next decade. If not, well, there's always Game Boy.
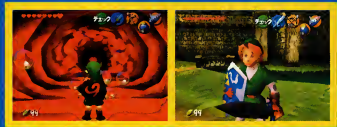
Zelda 64 is one of the most anticipated games of the decade, it isn't incorrect to say that the fate of N64 rides on its success. Can Miyamoto deliver? He hasn't failed yet

standards for licensed games. The company's lock-out chip also ensured it got a cut on every game; that enabled Nintendo to make a killing, and, more importantly, to sell hardware at or below cost, delivering more power for less money. Unfortunately, NES was still marketed to children, and Nintendo apparently failed to realize than videogames might appeal to anyone older than 12. (Some say Nintendo continues to make this mistake today.) Although the company was making money hand over fist, it ignored an entire generation of gamers who, having grown up with 2600 and Mario, balked at playing the "kids games" on a toy system like NES. Some migrated to PC, others kept playing.

Enter Sega with Genesis, a machine that, like NES and 2600 before it, was a cheap, powerful game system with one important new feature: Both the games and the marketing were aimed at an older audience. NES lingered on, selling mostly tired, recycled games to new, young gamers, but Genesis (and to a far lesser extent NEC's TurboGrafx) quickly gained the loyalty of those (including older gamers with more disposable income) looking for the best games. Nintendo, unwilling to part ways with the aging NES, gave Sega an 18-month head start before introducing Super NES and managed to lose 50% of its market share in the years it went against Genesis. (By actively marketing Super NES for years after

Sega moved on to other projects, Nintendo did finally win the 16-bit war.)

By the mid-'90s, however, both 16-bit consoles were having the same problems. Their technological limits were being reached, games were stuck in the few genres the limited systems allowed, and increasing game quality meant larger, more expensive cartridges. Despite a number of add-ons introduced by Sega (all of which dramatically failed each element of the "2600 test"), the 16-bit industry seemed doomed, and sales began to slow. And because carts had to be ordered months in advance, representing a massive cash outlay, a few disappointing projects were enough to all but destroy many companies.

Project X

THE STORY SO FAR:

It sounds like the kind of thing any group of savvy engineers might think up over a drink: "What if we designed a media processor fast enough to decode MPEG and play games? It would be cheaper than existing hardware, so we could license it to DVD hardware companies and make a killing on game royalties, especially since DVD players will have far better penetration than games." Whereas most engineers would have dismissed the idea as too difficult to implement, the founders of VM Labs, well, founded VM Labs. It hasn't been easy: developing hardware, pitching it to conservative consumer electronics companies, creating robust tools for a unique game development environment. But by E3, the company was able to announce that, in fact, Project X was real and that hardware manufacturers on three continents were including Project X technology in their 1999 DVD systems.

HARDWARE:

Unlike every other modern 3D console, Project X does not provide dedicated 3D hardware. Instead, the system basically consists of some RAM (4MB is the minimum) and four processors on one chip. The net result is a media processor capable of performing 1.5 billion programmable instructions a second — 1,500 MIPS versus PlayStation's 30. That's enough to decode MPEG 2 in real time, and it's enough to create 3D graphics engines — polygon, ellipsoid, infinite plane — in software. Although there is a VM Labs minimum spec, the company expects upgrades and expansions in the future; add-ons like cameras for video telephony and modems for web browsing and multiplayer gaming are provided for in the hardware. Not every developer wants to create its own graphics engine from scratch, so ensuring that quality development tools and libraries exist will be essential. (VM Labs says it is committed to providing the most robust development

tools, libraries, and documentation yet seen on a console.) The freedom given developers by the media processor is a double-edged sword: It can enable them to make fantastic engines and graphics, but it may hobble less experienced developers.

SOFTWARE:

Software is a major vulnerability for VM Labs. First, because of the unique nature of the media processor, software quality may vary widely. Second, convincing publishers to develop for a system that will not be sold strictly as a gameplaying machine may be tough. Still, the potential installed base is very attractive, especially for mass-market games like Berkeley Systems' *You Don't Know Jack*. The software demos **Next Generation** has seen were not designed to look pretty, but to impress developers. We're impressed,

but we are anxious to see more complete games. The list of confirmed developers includes Activision, Berkeley Systems, Capcom, Crave, Fox, Hasbro, n-Space, Psygnosis, and THQ. Building third-party relationships from scratch is a tough job, and VM Labs will need to do it masterfully if Project X is to succeed.

MARKETING:

Marketing of Project X is tricky, but VM Labs plans on putting its own dollars behind the technology, in addition to the money it expects hardware manufacturers will spend to advertise Project X-enhanced systems. The first real marketing test, of course, will be coming up with a better name than Project X. Because of the DVD format, it is easy to imagine a number of unique marketing tie-ins, like Fox including demo versions of Project X games on DVD

When next generation systems like Saturn and PlayStation appeared on the horizons, many developers quickly abandoned 16-bit projects in favor of the CD-based machines, which promised low-cost of goods. Unfortunately, neither Saturn nor PlayStation had anything approaching a "critical mass" installed base in 1995, and the result was a mini crash. There was little new software for 16-bit, and even titles that sold to 50% of the installed base of the then next generation systems failed to make much money.

Which brings us to today. Despite Saturn's failure, the 32- and 64-bit market has been a new golden age for games. The introduction of 3D gameplay has increased

both the depth and the breadth of the games, and marketing and time have increased the age range of those who play games. PlayStation reigns supreme, but Nintendo, despite all the naysaying about the cartridge format for N64, has managed to maintain a healthy portion of the market, and thanks to a less crowded market, N64 third parties are making plenty of money.

The bottom line is that neither PlayStation nor N64 will be able to compete technologically with the next generation systems

The videogame industry as a whole has made mistakes during each generational transition, but it has rarely made the same mistake twice. In fact, the only common reason for each generational shift has been machines hitting their technological limits. So what about today? Why is **Next Generation** so confident that the coming generation shift will have a "soft landing"?
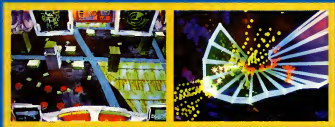
movie discs. One thing Toshiba and other manufacturers won't be able to do, though, is sell the hardware at a loss to drive sales; that could keep Project X systems at a higher price than other game systems, although Project X DVD players would cost about the same as other DVD players. It is likely that Project X-enhanced DVD players will be marketed as DVD players, not game machines, so Project X will have an entirely different marketing strategy from that for traditional game machines.

COMPETITIVE ANALYSIS:

Project X is so different from traditional game systems that it is difficult to make direct comparisons. The only comparable system was 3DO, but the comparison is unfair, since 3DO was ultimately only a game machine. Multifunction set-top boxes traditionally have not done well, but they've been overpriced and underpowered. We can say this: If Project X can achieve a 30% penetration in the DVD market, it will have active units in more homes than any console ever. And with that level of penetration, development is almost inevitable.

THE COMPANY LINE:

One of the criticisms leveled at VM Labs recently was that the company was trying to position Project X as an educational platform as well as as a game system. Richard Miller, CEO, responds: "Are you kidding?

Hardcore games with powerful 3D graphics, that is the price of entry. We'd be crazy not to focus on that, and that is our number one focus. All I am trying to say is that because Project X is going to be embedded in the next generation of video entertainment platforms, which are likely to have a much broader demographic and a larger user base, there is an opportunity for publishers and developers to develop new applications, where previously the niche market was just too small. There's an opportunity for companies like Purple Moon to actually get to their audience. So it's an opportunity, but high-performance, kick-ass, 3D titles, that is what we're all about, and that's really where all our attention is."

And what about the lack of dedicated 3D hardware? How much of a liability is that? "Developers don't want polygons, they want MIPS [laughs]. Polygons are all well and good, but if you ask

developers, what they really want is the ability to be able to program each pixel individually with their own routines, their own functions, their own filters, their own effects, and there isn't a platform in the world that lets you do that today. You know, polygons are still great ... [but] don't prejudge what [developers] would like to do. Don't design a 3D polygon engine that says, 'You really want to do your polygons this way.' Let them go and decide for themselves. Our developers are writing their own 3D polygon pipelines. Even though we have provided them with what we think is a pretty good one, they still want to write their own because that's the way they can really differentiate their title."

FUTURE PROGNOSIS:

The implications if Project X succeeds are staggering: Game machines in every home attached to a TV could completely change the industry. The Project X business plan is nothing short of brilliant, and with the announcements of hardware partners, it's already working. Will it do as well as hoped? If prices of Project X-enhanced DVDs are kept close to those of regular DVDs, and the company signs one or two more major hardware players (like Matsushita), Project X may have a good shot of reaching critical mass, either in late 1999 or 2000. But in the end, of course, it all comes down to software support.

BOTTOM LINE:

If the software is there, if the cost isn't prohibitively high, and if the hardware manufacturers stand behind the system for more than one or two hardware iterations, Project X could succeed. But that's a lot of "ifs," and the only thing that's certain right now is that Project X is a very, very neat idea.

First, third parties will not abandon PlayStation or N64 as fast as the 16-bit systems were dropped. Publishers left too much money on the table in the last transition, and few will repeat that blunder. Expect software to come out for PlayStation and N64 long after the systems are considered dead by hardcore gamers.

Also, as Sony's Phil Harrison notes, "Unlike with Genesis, as PlayStation matures, games keep getting better, but because of the CD format and the installed base, they also get cheaper." On N64, the continuing output of high-quality titles from Nintendo and Rare means that third-party efforts continue unabated.

The overall makeup of the market has changed as well, both in how games are sold and in who buys them. In the '70s and '80s, videogames were looked at as an extension of the toy market, so seasonal, post-holiday crashes were expected. With the industry so dependent on fourth-quarter sales, the market became inherently unstable — if another toy became the hot holiday buy, the game industry was in serious trouble. These days, more games are still sold between Thanksgiving and New Year's, but at least they've become a year-round business. Just as important, the demographics of game buyers have changed radically. As the median age of players went up, more titles were bought by gamers, not

parents. The broadening of the market has had a stabilizing effect.

Do the next generation systems even have a chance, then? Or, as Sony would have us believe, is the industry beyond the need for a next generation? Despite the best efforts of engineers to squeeze the most power possible from aging hardware, both PlayStation and N64 will eventually succumb to technological limitations.

The bottom line is, no matter how large the installed base, no matter how great the marketing, no matter how total the retail partnerships, neither PlayStation nor N64 will be able to compete technologically with the

Dreamcast

THE STORY SO FAR:

Few companies have fallen as far, as fast, as Sega did between the high of Genesis and the low of Saturn. With terrible products like Sega CD and 32X, and terrible games like Bug, Sega nearly managed to totally discredit what was once one of the most respected and recognized brand names in games. Even with major corporate shake-ups, some people doubt that anyone will ever be able to successfully market a consumer game machine with the word "Sega" on it. And that may be just the way Sega likes it. Once again, as in the Genesis days, the company is in a "nothing to lose" position, enabling it to take risks no one else can as it seeks to reestablish itself as a premier console brand.

HARDWARE:

For the first time in history, Sega's home hardware is truly impressive. After nixing a deal with 3Dfx for the powerful yet expensive Voodoo technology (a lawsuit

is still pending over the rift), Sega went with the cheaper, unproven PowerVR second generation technology. The company added a powerful CPU by Hitachi and an optional OS by Microsoft (whose DirectX 5.2, included with Dreamcast, fully supports all the special features of PowerVR 2G, and makes them accessible to developers inexperienced with the esoteric infinite-plane rendering technique PowerVR uses). With 16MB main memory, the machine will sell for under $299. Sega's Visual Memory System PDA will put a mini screen in the controller, an advance that has the potential to dramatically advance certain types of games (sports gameplay selection being the obvious example). The machine also comes with a modem (and as ISP and a dedicated matching service). While the CPU is only 200MHz, it is optimized for floating point operations — the math required for 3D performance. In short, Sega has more than delivered what it needs to on the hardware side. When it launches in the U.S. in September 1999, it

should still be capable of significantly better performance than state-of-the-art PC setups.

SOFTWARE:

Sega will need killer first-party apps and strong third-party support. The first part is no problem — even though Saturn failed, Sega engineers cranked out many excellent first-party titles (like World Wide Soccer and World Series Baseball) and arcade conversions. As for the software front, Sega of America's head, Bernie Stolar, was instrumental in driving third-party development on PlayStation, but presumably he brought his contact list with him to Sega. The highest installed base will be on PlayStation and N64, but we expect strong third-party support on Dreamcast. Why? Because no one wants to see Sony get a stranglehold on the market; certain games simply can't be done on current systems; porting PC titles should be easy thanks to the Windows OS; development teams want to play with new toys; and, if for no other reason, publishers are afraid that competitors will beat them to "the next big thing." We expect many developers to commit to a Dreamcast game for launch, or for shortly after. Then, if sales take off, development will continue. If initial sales are poor, however, don't expect to see a lot of second efforts.

MARKETING:

Sega has committed more than $100 million to launching Dreamcast. That's probably enough money, but the marketing campaign needs to be smart. Foote, Cone & Belding, the lead agency for Dreamcast, is a good choice: The company has done work for MTV, Taco Bell, and 3Com. Sega still faces significant marketing challenges, particularly at retail, where relationships were sorely hurt by Saturn. Fixing the retail picture will likely occupy a great deal of Sega's time over the next 18 months. Finally, although we still

Welcome to Dreamcast. VMSs can connect to exchange data (above left). The controller is almost as large as the unit itself (center). The industrial design is extremely sleek (right)

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next generation systems, and the gamers who matter — the influencers, the people who drive "word of mouth" (in short, the readers of this magazine) — will always go where the best games are. Where the hardcore go, the casual gamers who make up the bulk of the market invariably follow.

A number of other factors are at play as well. Although installed bases may be smaller initially, the first games out for the new systems will invariably sell a lot of copies (look at Crush'n USA on N64, for example). More importantly, retaining games early for a system gives developers the experience they need to have the best (and best-selling) games when the system does hit mass-market proportions.

Large publishers handle system changes easily, but for smaller developers, deciding when and where to switch **can make or break a company**

"It's charity work when you do the first title," says one developer. "But if you don't start early enough, then you're behind the curve in the first and second big-selling sessions for the new systems. You might make more money, sooner, if you stick with the current system, but in the long run, being able to introduce second generation titles on a new platform, when everyone else is just figuring things out,

is worth the investment." Large publishers handle that easily: Put some teams on new consoles and keep the bulk on the moneymakers. For smaller developers, deciding when and where to switch can make or break a company.

Ultimately, though, it comes back to games. If the power to create better games exists, developers will exploit them. Does that

don't like the logo (it looks too much like Cinnabon's), after some initial skepticism (most notably from **Next Generation Online**), the name Dreamcast has grown on us. Is melodramatic? Sure, but the system may be powerful enough to pull off a melodramatic name successfully, and it certainly attracts more attention than the just-OK "Katana."

COMPETITIVE ANALYSIS:

Sega seems to be doing everything right this time, but Sony and Nintendo are not simply going to bow out. Expect the console wars to get ugly next year. The fact is, it is more sound economically (at least in the short term) to develop for an established platform, and convincing developers otherwise will be tough. Sega will also have a rough time at retail, even at $2up or $199, if Sony and Nintendo drop, as expected, to $99, with acres of cheap games available.

THE COMPANY LINE:

Given the success PlayStation and Nintendo 64 enjoy in the market right now, how hard will it be for Sega to court third parties? Lee Carafet, VP of corporate communications, says: "It hasn't been hard at all. We met with everyone at E3, and we were very happy with the results — there are a lot more people signed up than we've announced. As for installed base, I'm not concerned about that at all. If you went on that, you would never introduce a new platform. Third parties are very excited." Although the Dreamcast specs are awesome now, the system won't be out for 18 months. Will it still look as impressive then? "In terms of power, Dreamcast is so powerful that it's becoming a nonissue. Essentially we have a level of specs so developers can make the games they want to make, with all the barriers gone. Traditionally, when developers start a game, they have this great concept, and it's going to look great, but by the time it gets to market, they've had to compromise — 'I have to trade off audio for speed, I'm going to have to hide all these walls, etc.' With Dreamcast we've eliminated all those barriers. Everything has so much memory you don't have to worry about it anymore, you don't have to do tricks to limit yourself. It just won't be an issue." Sounds great. So why do we have

to wait 18 months? "In the U.S. we decided not to launch this year so developers would have time to do software that does everything they want, so they don't have to make compromises just because of the system's launch date."

FUTURE PROGNOSIS:

Dreamcast looks great so far, both on paper and in demos. It has powerful hardware, and Sega is signing up the best third parties in the business and refocusing its entire development effort in Japan toward Dreamcast (See Intelligence, NG 43). At the same time, it is going against deeply entrenched competitors during the most robust market ever. No one — not retailers or developers — wants to upset this market. In the end, though, it will come down to gamers and games. If Sega can provide compelling

launch software and pull in substantial initial sales, getting retailers and developers aboard will be no problem. The next generation race is by no means over, though — it's barely begun — but Sega is where it needs to be today if it hopes to win in 1999 and beyond.

BOTTOM LINE:

Sega is in the best position it's been in since before the launch of Genesis. Still, a lot can happen between now and launch, and the last four months of 1999 will be the most critical in Sega's history. Sony and Nintendo know that too. Expect the holiday season next year to be among the most brutal this industry has ever seen. However, between its hardware, marketing savvy, and the painful lessons learned from its own history, Sega should be ready for the challenge.
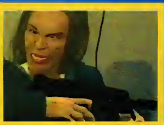
Launch titles for the system will certainly include Warp's D2 (above right), and probably Daytona 2 (above left) as well. No word on rumors of an Altered Beast pack-in

guarantee success for Sega or VM Labs? Not really. Remember 3DO? The next generation systems that succeed may very well come from Sony or Nintendo in 24 or 36 months, but once a generational shift begins, it cannot be stopped.

Assuming, then, that either Dreamcast or Project X is impressive enough to develop for (and that's a pretty safe assumption), **Next Generation** expects to see few changes through 1998. However, some teams that will be delivering software for this holiday season will begin work on next generation projects immediately afterward, so we expect to see a decline in releases for PlayStation in 1999, leading up to the release of Dreamcast.

Because Nintendo 64 is still actively gaining third parties, and because the absolute number of projects for this console is so small, we expect N64 output to remain constant through 1999

The overall effect may be a slight dip in the industry in 1999, but nothing even approaching the slump of 1995. Because most larger publishers will continue supporting current generation systems through 2000, the transition to the next generation systems is likely to be slower than it has been in the past. That lag may lessen the advantage Sega and VM Labs gain by launching early, and it may leave the door open for Sony and Nintendo as they prepare to launch their next

generation systems (currently expected in the fall of 2000).

The game industry has

matured greatly since the boom and bust days of the '80s. Each transition has been less tumultuous, and we expect the next generation to be the smoothest yet. Who will win the next generation console wars? It's too early to call, but as games move further into the mainstream, the risk of another crash lessens. It may make the industry less exciting, but a stable industry is a healthy industry, and a healthy industry enables developers to worry less about the market and more about games.

I HAVE AN ENORMOUS TANK BATTALION.

I HAVE AN ARSENAL OF WEAPONS AT MY FINGERTIPS.

I'VE DESTROYED BUILDINGS IN MY WAY.

S O W H Y

I AM ONE WITH THE CROSSHAIRS.

I AM A FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH.

Hey hot shot, you're dead because you didn't think. To save the Earth in Urban Assault,™ you must manage your resources, upgrade your technologies, control your squadrons, and deploy your troops using an interactive map. All this at the same time you're shooting everything in sight.

I DEPLOYED MY GUYS USING THE TRANSPARENT MAP.

I TOLD MY GUYS TO ATTACK FROM BOTH FLANKS.

I KNOW WHERE THE TECH UPGRADE SECTOR IS.

I KNOW WHERE TO PLACE MY HOST STATION.

I KNOW WHERE THE POWER STATIONS ARE.

SO WHY AM I STILL DEAD?

I SAW A MYKONIAN CUBOID FORMATION.

I'M BEING SMART ABOUT MY MOVES.

I KNOW WHICH SECTORS ARE SECURE.

Use your map to deploy your troops and jump into any of 15 different types of vehicles.

Create your squadrons and set their level of aggressiveness to defend, attack, or raid.

Battle 5 unique alien and human enemy races.

Hey mastermind, you're dead because you didn't get your hands dirty. In Urban Assault,™ you have to battle on the frenzied front lines at the same time you're strategizing the entire war. Of course, your years studying at military school will come in handy, but to win, you better warm up that trigger finger. Shoot your browser over to **www.microsoft.com/games/urbanassault**.

URBAN ASSAULT

ALPHAS

Previews, the way Mom used to write 'em
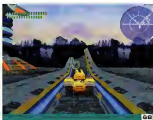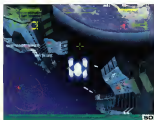
Isn't it time you had a new experience in a game? Unfortunately, there just aren't enough games in development that differentiate themselves from the pack. But we're not about to give you a mixed bag of maybes, might-happens, and mediocre genre conformers. (You can read about them in all the single-platform books dedicated to one-track-mind fanboys.) So enjoy our bigger, more in-depth previews of games we've hand-picked to showcase this month.

MILESTONES

49

Psygnosis

What's next for PlayStation's posh publisher? How about *Wipeout* for Nintendo 64 and a sequel to *Colony Wars*?

Before Psygnosis, Liverpool had the Beatles. But don't invite any of the company's many talented programmers or artists for a pint of lager at one of the Abbey Road pubs: they won't go there — that's part of Liverpool's past. And one quick look at the upcoming *Wipeout 64* and *Colony Wars 2* is reminder enough that the developers assembled here are all about the future.

As much as a year ago, there were rumors that *Wipeout* would be the first Psygnosis title to break the 64-bit cartridge barrier. In actuality, the game has only been in development for a few months. With seven new tracks, along with fresh ships and weapons, and a highly anticipated four-player mode planned, this is not just going to be a port of *Wipeout XL*. *Wipeout* purists, though, will be keen to know that

some of the original game will be making its way back into this version

"We've combined the handling of the two," says Producer Andy Satterthwaite, who also worked on *Wipeout XL*. "It was much back into the first one, but the collisions were awful. We have taken the improved collisions of *XL* and kept the flow and handling of the first one. And combining

Wipeout purists will be keen to know that some of the original game will be making its way **into this version**
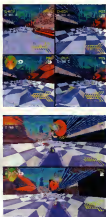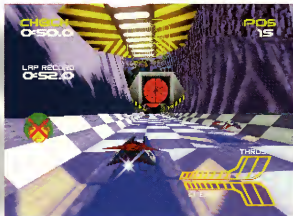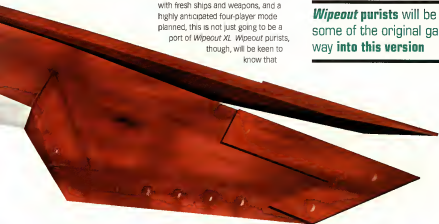
Look Ma, textures! No easy trick for N64, *Wipeout* in one-, two-, and four-player mode retains its hip palette

it with the N64 analog stick just makes it a much more intuitive, free-flowing experience."

Words of comfort for those who've played the Wipeout wannabes that never even remotely captured its gameplay essence. "Extreme G was nice to look at," says Wipeout 64 designer Rob Francis, "but basically it handled like a dog." With N64's hardware capabilities, it has been easy for imitators to get the fantastic lighting effects that Wipeout XL

"*Extreme G* was nice to look at, but basically it handled **like a dog**"

Rob Francis, designer, Psygnosis

managed in software on PlayStation. The Wipeout 64 team is acutely aware of this and has dedicated "a chunk of time," according to Francis, to bring the effects to the next level.

While the breakneck racing of the past Wipeout titles was enough to satisfy most, Satterthwaite says it is time to bring something more to the table. Going beyond the standard racing

Trademark neo-Tokyo visuals and winding track designs are intact, along with a few new surprises

in which players must take first, second, or third, Wipeout 64 will introduce time trials and weapons challenges. "In the time trial challenges," says Satterthwaite, "you'll be given a specific ship, and you have to get around the track under a certain time to get the qualification. With weapon challenges, your task is to destroy a certain number of ships in the time available. So, we've got to make weapons that just kick ass because you've got to do it."

New weapons include a shield drain that locks like a missile on competing ships, and pipes that shield energy to players' ships. There's also a cloak mode, in which ships turn semi-transparent, enabling players to fly through other ships. On a more destructive note, the Oracon ship has what Satterthwaite describes as a

"Death Star-type" weapon. "It forms this great big energy ball, which then pumps down the track and takes out anything in its path. It will be a bit like the rail gun in Quake 2 — it will fire instantly and pass through everything."

Of course, the new tracks will be similar in style to their predecessors, with jumps, steep slopes, and winding banks. But the similarities will end there. "We still have got an icy level," says Francis, "but

Massive jumps give players an aerial perspective of the track, and a considerable look at how many polygons the game's engine pushes

it's not icy mountains. We've set up an arctic base type of thing so you've got radar dishes spinning around and stuff like that." Francis continues to describe an underwater level, in which players race through submerged tunnels with aquatic scenery varying from plants to a giant octopus. Another new track sends players hurtling over the mouth of an active volcano, complete with rivers of molten lava bubbling over the sides.

Beyond the new features, Psygnosis

Already Psygnosis has managed to get fairly rich environments and a 3D-frame-per-second rate on **its early tracks**

The power of the N64 finally enables Psygnosis to implement a multiplayer mode that doesn't require two systems and a link cable

is adding more replay to the classic Wipeout formula by including a unique weapon for each ship. "I used to only play one particular ship," says Satterthwaite, "so we wanted to encourage people to get used to the different types."

Already Psygnosis has managed to get fairly rich environments and a 3D-frame-per-second rate on its early tracks. (The team guarantees 30fps for even the four-player mode.) At this early state, the lighting effects are far from done, and the music, an integral part of the Wipeout experience, has begun making its transition from redbook audio

In *Colony Wars: Vengeance* the player now fights for Earth's Navy, the Imperialistic enemy from the original game

to MIDI, although the team has somehow retained some semblance of the quality techno score the game is known for. While the schedule is ambitious, expect to see it this year by the time the holidays roll around.

While the company is still cutting its teeth on Nintendo 64, there are few development houses that can beat Psygnosis on PlayStation. In spite of the console's limited memory and 3D capabilities as compared with a PC, the company has still consistently churned out effects that have wowed players. And with the *Colony Wars* sequel, Psygnosis seems to have done it again.

Colony Wars 2 is Psygnosis' first opportunity to create a franchise game with storyline continuity. This time around, players are on the Navy's side, which Producer Mike Ellis says actually sees itself as the good guys. Players assume the role of Mertins, a young Navy boy with a taste for dishes served cold (that is, he's bitter as hell).

Using an enhanced version of the original *Colony Wars* engine, the

The pods become quite a versatile tool for various missions

Combat, while familiar, offers additional nuances for the experienced player

designers have created a world with more detail than ever before. Most notably, capital ship models are both larger and more complicated. "Actual big craft in the game now feature animated parts, so sections actually rotate around the main part of the whole," says Ellis. "Every one of the lead battleships is composed of a series of components, which flash when you hit them, so you know they're weak spots."

As the rebuilt Navy reclaims lost

In terrain- and space-based missions, players need to use the grapple gun

territory, mission objectives expand into new areas. Ellis explains that many players thought the missions in the first game involved doing too much of the same thing, so "we've tried to put in as many different varied missions as possible." Among those are mining missions, where players enter an *Asteroids*-like environment to hunt for crystals, as well as the long-awaited ground missions, where planetary assault or defense is the goal, depending on which side occupies the planet

More often than not, design enhancements are overlooked in sequels, but not here. The combat, while similar to the original, offers additional nuances for the experienced player. The biggest change is the addition of the pod, a secondary device that serves different purposes. There are defense pods, repair pods, and probe pods. So, for example, players might be given a mission in which they first steal information from one of the enemy battleships. Older weapons have also been tweaked, and new weapons like the Leech beam can alter the balance of power on a mission. Also new to the game are Aces, special characters who possess powers above and beyond the average fighter and who at times influence the flow of combat.

Although many of these

While the ships in *Colony Wars: Vengeance* may seem familiar to sci-fi fans, they have never been done so well in a console game

improvements may seem familiar to space combat aficionados, Ellis and his team seem to be harnessing them in unique ways for an already spectacular game. With the combination of its readiness to take on Nintendo 64, its current hold on the PlayStation market, and its recent strong showing of *Drakan* for PC (and possibly Dreamcast), Psygnosis is unquestionably a company for all platforms.
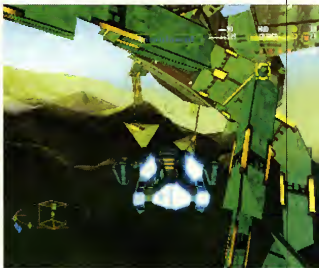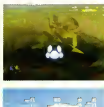
The new surface assault missions are rendered in stunning detail. This gigantic spider guardian is 350 polygons large — and one hell of a challenge

Homeworld

Relic's debut may be one of the most innovative realtime strategy games since *Command & Conquer*

Format:	PC
Publisher:	Sierra Studios
Developer:	Relic
Release Date:	November 1998
Origin:	Canada

The ship models show an attention to detail that some space shooters lack

The macro view mode enables some stunning visuals that give players ample evidence of the scale of the game. This immersive feeling of scale carries over, even in zoomed-out mode, greatly enhancing gameplay

t close range, *Homeworld*, with hundreds of ships engaged in epic combat, looks a lot like *Wing Commander*. But this isn't a space shooter — it's a realtime strategy game in which players will never be able to take control of or fly an individual ship.

So why has the team devoted so much time to creating detailed ship models and sim-quality AI flight plans that include immelmans and split-Ses, as well as flawless wingman attack and defense tactics? "It's simple," says Alex Garden, president of Relic. "Because they know they can do it, everyone is going to zoom right in on the first battle, just to watch. Then, when they play the game the way they're supposed to — with the ships roughly the size of units in other RTS games, they'll believe that

combat is going on at the scale they witnessed. It just adds incredibly to the immersiveness of the game."

It allows Relic to do something else, too: "By taking the player out of the cockpit, we can really let him see the choreography of the battles," says Garden. "We went this to be *Star Wars. X-Wing* was great, but it didn't really feel like you were in *Star Wars* because you were in the cockpit. With *Homeworld*, we can do all these things — have flaming ships crash into the bridges of capital ships, say — that really give you that *Star Wars* feeling."

The concept alone was powerful enough for Sierra Studios to sign on with, as Garden puts it, "two whiteboard presentations and no

The speed of the game is telegraphed by the ships' vapor trails (top)

Zooming in to see damaged fighters slam into capital ships is one of the major treats of the game

demo." And the team, even at this early date, seems close to pulling off its vision. The plot may be new to the interactive realm, but those who remember "Battle Star Galactica" will find it familiar. A space-faring race, stripped of all technology and banished from its homeworld to a distant planet, relearns space travel technology after

structures right and still ship on time. Yet, the gameplay features a number of innovations. First, of course, is the incredibly detailed behavior each individual unit shows up close. But the fact that combat occurs in true 3D space should have more of an impact on gameplay. It enables a huge number of innovations in unit design and strategy: Watching a group of defensive fighters move into a protective sphere around a wounded frigate or corvette is something that must be seen to be appreciated. Because all the action occurs in deep space, there are no bases. Rather, fighters dock at capital ships to refuel and repair. (Yes,

> **"We can do these things** — have flaming ships crash into the bridges of capital ships, say — that really give you **that Star Wars feeling"**
>
> **Alex Garden**, president, Relic

thousands of years and begins a crusade to the almost mythical homeworld. Without revealing too much of the plot, suffice it to say that the success of the crusade soon becomes of primary importance to the survival of the race.

The gameplay is based around a number of battles that occur between hyperspace jumps on the way to the homeworld and includes everything from fights against pirates to full-scale melees against the enemy race. Keeping with the Star Wars theme, the actual battles themselves are designed to be epic in scope, with up to 1,000 ships engaging in single-player mode, and thousands of ships battling at once in multiplayer games.

Each race has basically the same units, as the team didn't think it could tune two entirely different unit

The battles occur on a truly epic scale; many views are available
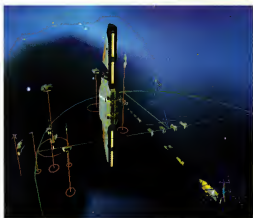
Although control is slightly more tricky than with a 2D game, after a few minutes, it becomes intuitive. This is 3D control done right

Tall, narrow ships are a *Homeworld* hallmark (top), as are heavy armaments (above)

pixel-perfect docking can be witnessed.) Controlling units in 3D space is more complicated than just clicking, but not too much more difficult — an intuitive interface makes moving units into place fairly simple. Several control innovations, like a rally button or the nearly interface-free screen layout, also increase the ease in which players can move and organize units.

The huge variety of ship arrangement options, along with the vast number of ships, should enable an entirely new combat experience on a scale that surpasses other space combat games by an order of magnitude. With such huge battles, though, AI performance and unit tuning become paramount. While all the rest of the pieces of the game appear to be shaping up nicely, AI has yet to be implemented fully or tuned. Despite the innovations already in place, if Relic fails to create finely tuned units and excellent competitive and cooperative unit AI, this game will be a failure. The team, of course, fully understands that and plans to devote much of the time between now and the ship date solely

Ship maneuvers are beautifully choreographed by AI routines

to play tuning. It's worth mentioning that while this is Relic's first project, most of the team members (including 23-year-old Gardien) have years of experience at such Canadian codeshops as Radical, EA Canada, and Gray Matter.

If Relic can pull off the AI successfully, it may be sitting on one of the most impressive realtime strategy games since the genre's inception. Certainly *Homeworld* has the chance to take the genre significantly past the plateau it seems to have been stuck on since the releases of *C&C* and *WarCraft*. NG

The graphics are near-TV quality (right). The chaos of battle (above, top right) is effectively communicated in the game

Redjack:
Revenge of the Brethren

CyberFlix sets sail with another nautical adventure. But can it match the smashing success of *Titanic*?

The detail in this character's armor and expression is representative of CyberFlix's desire to make a more lifelike adventure game

Format:	**PC/Macintosh**
Publisher:	**THQ**
Developer:	**CyberFlix**
Release Date:	**September 1998**
Origin:	**U.S.**

360-degree spherical environments, with cinematic lighting and ambient sounds.

Such immersive qualities could help revive the sagging adventure game genre, and *Redjack*'s interactive story could have just what it takes to win over new gamers, as well as satisfy current adventure fans. **NG**

Riding high on the success of *Titanic: Adventure Out of Time*, CyberFlix stands ready to unsheathe its next adventure game, *Redjack: Revenge of the Brethren*. And even without a movie tie-in to boost sales this time, advances in the company's proprietary DreamFactory technology should help the team do what it does best: tell a story.

Redjack puts players in the skin of Nicholas Dove, who soon becomes involved in a sea of treacherous adventures involving the Brethren, a band of pirates formed by the mighty Redjack. Befitting of a pirate tale, *Redjack* includes much more action gameplay than other adventure games. Besides solving puzzles, players must successfully thrust and parry their way through sword fights to survive.

Fully realized 3D animated characters move fluidly in such scenes — the company employed a movement specialist to choreograph gestures and facial expressions. The result is more lifelike characters, rather than the clumsy animated photographs used in *Titanic*.

Along with personality-packed characters, the title features intriguing

Redjack's gorgeous interiors rival those of *Titanic*, while advances in the engine enable 3D characters to move realistically

WHISPER IN MY EAR
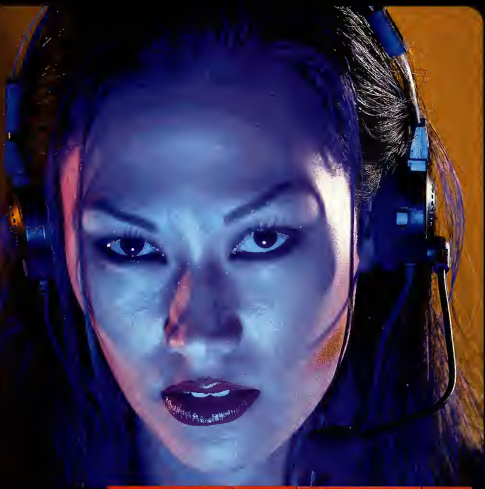
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combat action
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real-time online
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chat some trash
talk to me

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JUL '98 ISSUE 11

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-Chris Anderson
President & CEO, Imagine Media, Inc.

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Omikron

French games are known for looking great and playing average, but Parisian outfit Quantic Dream is determined to make its sci-fi adventure the exception to the rule

How to follow *Tomb Raider* is a problem that Eidos is all too familiar with. *Fighting Force* and *Deathtrap Dungeon* failed to live up to the promise first glimpsed as *Tomb Raider*, and the suggestion that Eidos might be a stable with only one horse has increased from a whisper to a chorus in recent months. As the world waits for yet another helping of the uber-franchise in the form of *Tomb Raider III*, and the much-hyped *Daikatana*, Eidos might silence the chorus with a game that owes more to science fiction cinema than to the overly familiar antics of the eponymous Lara Croft.

French developer Quantic Dream has been working on *Omikron* for a year and a half. For much of that time, it had no publisher, but that didn't seem to bother the team. Anyone who takes more than a cursory glance at the game will understand why. As Eidos Senior Producer Philip Campbell explains, this was a videogame, but it was also, he says in a hushed tone, art — and that's enough to give even the most powerful marketing guys a few sleepless nights. The last time anybody tried "art," it became *Heart of Darkness*, a cautionary tale of inflated egos, crumbling discipline, and spiralling live-year budgets. That too, was French.

"In the past," says Campbell, "French games have looked incredible, like art, and *Omikron* will look incredible too, but there's more to this game than you can see in one screenshot. A great deal more."

The atmosphere of the game, and of *Omikron*, the domed city of the title, is immediately evocative of every sci-fi film you've ever seen — from *Blade Runner* to *Star Wars* to, suitably enough, *Fifth Element* — but it's a subtle mix. You can't quite put your finger on exactly where you are in the universe, but you do feel as if you've been here before.

Format:	PC/PlayStation
Publisher:	Eidos Interactive
Developer:	Quantic Dream
Release Date:	Q1 1999
Origin:	France

"We've completely changed the design of the world since the original work began," Campbell says. "It looked too much like *Blade Runner*."

What seems to have happened is a meeting of minds. Both Campbell and the Parisian design team are into comics. Specifically, the strange futuristic works of Moebius and Enki Bilal. The lead artist on the project, Loïc Normand, knows that the best kind of science fiction design is one that leaves onlookers with the impression that the world has being going on without them. *Omikron*'s world achieves this effortlessly. It looks lived in.

Divided into four main "worlds," as Campbell describes them, the play area is vast. The city is almost two-and-a-half miles from end to end — so big that players must use hovercars to get around. As the story expands, so do the horizons, moving out of the city into the labyrinthine catacombs to snow-covered plains (where players get to ride a giant beast called a Sham) to a floating city and then back to the city for the dramatic climax.

Each of these themed areas then opens up, like a Russian doll, to reveal even greater graphical diversity. The city of Omikron has a red-light district, bathed in neon, and a nomad quarter that borrows

heavily from Arabic culture in its architecture. There's an entire suburb crisscrossed with Venetian-style canals (with true reflections in the water). The beauty of the *Omikron* world genuinely rivals that of Cyan's prerendered *Myst*.

But as we all too well know, looks aren't everything — lead designer and Quantic boss, David Cage, is aware of this. "Graphic design has been given maximum attention," he admits. "Most people acknowledge that French games have a different graphical approach. Design is certainly important in our everyday life, and we grow up surrounded by the likes of Philippe Starck, Jean-Paul Gaulbxe and the Louvre, and our design schools are world-famous.

Character interaction is the most important element of *Omikron*

Quantic Dream wanted players to feel immersed in an environment teeming with life that moves forward independent of the player's actions

Despite its classic text adventure roots, more often than not, action speaks louder than words

But if we have paid careful attention to the design of *Omikron* — and we have — then we have been even more attentive to gameplay. A game is something you buy to play. If, on top of that, it is beautiful, then so much the better."

Quantic intends to make the gameplay just as diverse as the art. As a self-proclaimed action/adventure, there's room for more than just running and shooting — for instance, hand-to-hand combat, motion-captured dialogue, bodily possession, and complex-but-common-sense puzzles.

But it's the story that is the foundation of *Omikron*. From the moment the game begins, the player belongs to the world. Campbell describes the player as an interlocer who jumps into the already proceeding life of the lead character Kayl.

As in Kalisto's *Dark Earth*, the lead character, beat-cop Kayl, appears surrounded by an already unfolding series of events and relationships, and the player must move quickly to stay ahead. He has a wife, a full-time job, and a missing partner — points of departure from which the game unfolds, piece by piece, across a vast play area. "Movie" is another word that perhaps Eidos would rather not see too closely associated with a game, steeped as it is in the fallout from the dark days of FMV; however, *Omikron's* depth mirrors, if not exceeds, that of a film in many respects. In creating the domed city, Cage feels he is heading up a production that would not seem out of place on the backlot of a Hollywood studio.

"The scenario is one of the key elements to a game. More than six months have been devoted to the writing of the tome describing *Omikron's* universe — characters, political system, ecology, history, geography. To create a world
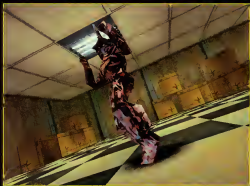
people will believe in, you first need to lay out its history, its inhabitants, and imagine what made them what they are now. But on the other hand, I didn't want people to be overwhelmed by tons of facts, hints, and little stories. The scenario thus allows players who are not interested in the background of the world to progress with a minimum number of elements and others, who wish they could know more, to learn more by watching the Transcan [*Omikron's* TV system] or reading books in libraries."

And then there's talking — a feature that sets *Omikron* apart from previous action/adventure games. Every building in the city is inhabited by NPCs, who may or may not be relevant to the story. Regardless of their worth to the plot, however, all are interactive, and thanks to Quantic's facial motion capture technology, eerily realistic. Lips move in sync (for the first time ever), and expressions change to accompany the tone and level of the conversation. Kayl (or whoever the player is at the time) will get an aggressive response if he asks aggressive questions, and similarly, will get considerate and polite responses if he

Omikron boasts some of the most unique character design and locations

Tech specs

Though by no means the heart and soul of the game, *Omikron's* technology is as progressive as the gameplay. Quantic's 3D engine affords huge, contiguous interior and exterior environments, minimal fogging, and infinite light sources (which give the maps their strangely dreamlike quality). The game runs in true color SVGA on a standard P233, without hardware acceleration. It is compatible with Direct3D and Voodoo cards (including Voodoo²), but the fact that the *Omikron* engine is perfectly at home in software allows for a faithful PlayStation version — with the key differences being less color depth and an obviously much lower resolution.

The huge maps, which should present a real problem for the RAM-limited Sony machine, are faithfully re-created, and Quantic is employing a new texturing technique to ensure as little pixelation as possible.

plays it cool. It's the icing on the cake, graphically, but it points again to an attention to detail sadly lacking from many of today's games. More than that, perhaps, it highlights the importance of interacting with other characters in order to progress. Players can shoot their way through some of the game, but they're not going to find out what's really going on unless they talk.

As a character, Kayl operates on a number of levels — fleshed out with a present, burdened with a past, and thrown into an uncertain future — in a world where one minute the player is making a violent arrest and the next decoding a speaking rune etched onto a cave wall. That's a pretty large stretch to have in one game, and it presents unique challenges for the design team — a challenge made all the more difficult by the inherently open-ended nature of the player-character. Kayl is unlikely to be the central character for long. As the game progresses, the chances of his meeting a sticky end ramp up considerably. Once dead, his soul leaps into the body of the first NPC to touch the corpse, yielding, by Campbell's estimates,

as many as 15 possible "virtual reincarnations" in one game.

The emphasis on the soul is no gimmick but rather, a plot essential. The evil-doers of the game are demons, seeking to enslave the innocent (and not so innocent) souls of the planet. Omikron is a city where a select few know of this evil plot and seek to present some kind of resistance. It is into this clandestine battle that the player is drawn — beginning with the missing partner.

The plot, which is, at its simplest, a fight between good and evil, and at its most complex, a convoluted sci-fi conspiracy thriller, progresses no matter what. If good, players keep up. And if they actually master the art of juggling violence with solid investigative skills and puzzle solving, they get ahead.

In making gameplay styles, the team is clearly taking a risk. How, for example, do developers present hand-to-hand combat with sophistication to the *Tekken* generation and not have people laugh in their face? "It's something we've paid special attention to," explains Campbell, "because it has to be just right. You have to offer enough variety and reason to make the fight scenes work for the player while accepting that you can never match a game designed with just fighting in mind. We've gone further than any other game, and we're offering that variety."

Onscreen the results are impressive. Kayl rolls in and out of the screen, throws a full range of punches and kicks, as well as grapples, throws, and escape moves, and all the characters (player included) can execute special combo attacks to deadly effect — and it all blends seamlessly into the game world. It's no *Tekken*, but it works. Or rather, it fits, dovetailing smoothly with the other gameplay elements.

As Cage sees it, this mix is crucial to the originality and ultimately the success or failure of the game. "Omikron's main objective is to include real arcade elements like hand-to-hand fighting and shooting in a genuine adventure game," he says. "And those are not seen as separate parts, artificially put together in the game, but fully integrated pieces."

The usual reservations apply, of course, but it's hard to see how so much original and passionate effort could yield anything except a direct hit for Quantic Dream. A French game that's more than just a pretty face? Stranger things have happened.

The characters in *Omikron* are consistent with the overall look of the game

Every object in *Omikron* has been given a function, unlike in other 3D adventure games

Tiny Tank: Up Your Arsenal

AndNow's new mascot title blurs the line between platform adventure and shooter

Tiny Tank's effects are some of the most impressive seen on a PlayStation (top). Ramps send Tiny into spiraling flips (right)

N estled in a quiet corner of Half Moon Bay, a sleepy coastal town just south of San Francisco, the offices of AndNow could easily be mistaken for a dental clinic or flower shop. However, once inside the building, it becomes clear that AndNow's business is games. And the primary source of the company's excitement these days is a little character known as Tiny Tank.

The story is revealed through a series of radio shows that Tiny tunes in to throughout the game

At first glance, the gameplay resembles *Star Fox 64*'s tank battle. But once the game starts, it becomes much more than that. First, the gameplay isn't linear — Tiny can go virtually anywhere he wants. Also, the story is revealed through a series of radio shows that Tiny tunes in to throughout the game.

To understand Tiny, it is important to know the backstory. In the not-too-distant future, the need for a military force is dwindling. As a result, the military hires a public relations advisor, who comes up with the idea for a tank with personality — something cute that the general public will buy into. The result, Tiny Tank, is a huge success and leads to the development of sentient — or intelligent — weapons. One such weapon, MuTank, is jealous of Tiny's success, and has him assassinated during a publicized display of Tiny's cuteness. Subsequently, all sentient weapons become self-aware, and a plot to destroy mankind quickly unfolds. Players begin the game as Tiny Tank, 100 years after being shot, small "fix-it" crabs — native to sentient war machines — have meticulously reconstructed Tiny and brought him back to life.

Just like Tiny, players go into the game not knowing where they are or what happened. Between songs, a radio show comes on occasionally to which robots call in with questions — for instance, how to prevent rusting or why all humans have yet to be destroyed. Players slowly realize that the machines have driven humans into hiding, and the only hope for mankind is a foul-mouthed Tiny, who never really liked being cute in the first place. As players go further into the game, they can collect weapons from dead enemies and configure them on

Tiny can take weapons from dead enemies, increasing his firepower

Format:	PlayStation
Publisher:	MGM Interactive
Developer:	AndNow
Release Date:	Q3 1998
Origin:	U.S.

Tiny advances levels once every mission objective has been completed

Tiny's chassis. Also, brains can be collected and allocated to weapons or systems to improve accuracy and mobility. It is especially impressive for players to have all their weapons maxed out and firing independently of one another. Tiny also releases "teeny" tanks, smaller variations of Tiny, which hunt down and destroy enemies.

The game itself is a technical wonder for PlayStation. Players can insert their favorite music CDs during gameplay as an alternative to the radio show and then watch Tiny groove to the music. Appaloosa Software is responsible for the game's engine, which will render the game at 30 frames per second and handle two-player simultaneous deathmatch modes. The best example of Appaloosa's expertise is found in an early substage, where Tiny is only able to locate his enemy by its reflection in a room of mirrors. The game is anticipated to ship with at least 12 levels.

AndNow is emerging as one of the few new developers willing to take a gamble with originality. Both Tiny Tank and its upcoming Nooks & Crannies (see

Tiny faces many kinds of enemies, such as these robotic cowboys who want nothing more than to see mankind destroyed

NG 43) demonstrate a high degree of diversity. Tiny, as a character, has a certain attitude and appeal that avid "South Park" fans may find endearing. But whether or not AndNow's risks will pay off is a story that can only be told by sales figures later this year. NG

One stage requires players to look into mirrors to track invisible enemies

Because the main character is a tank, level designs are a lot different from those of typical 3D adventure games

69

Need for Speed III:
Hot Pursuit

The PC version of *NFSIII* is miles ahead
of its console cousin

To call the PC version of *Need for Speed III* a port of the PlayStation game would do it and its design team a great injustice. Producer Mark Madland says that it would be like comparing apples and oranges. He makes it clear that his group shares some knowledge and assets with the PlayStation team, but

NFSIII's visual effects include reflective surfaces, particle systems, variable-density smoke, and projected lighting, with no hit on frame rate
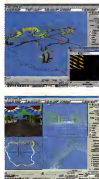
Tracks are easily ported from 3D Studio MAX to the game engine

overall, the game is platform-specific. For instance, he takes into account the latest 3D accelerators, sound cards, and multiplayer technology, all while reinventing the popular series.

Unlike PlayStation, the PC's larger capacity for textures and models enables the team to densely populate the tracks with objects that look realistic. Special effects like realtime lighting — headlights and taillights, for instance — are available in the accelerated version. To make the headlights actually look real, the game projects textures onto the track and other objects. "It is not the traditional way of doing it, but it works," says Madland.

To Madland, the immersiveness of the environment is as important as the

driving. "There will be a lot of effects, such as lightning, snow, and rain. Mud actually splatters, and there will be sparks, fires, and explosions. Even leaves blow up from the ground when you drive over them." The sound is equally immersive, with Dolby Surround boosting the quality of the environment effects that include things like radio chatter and explosions.

Part of the reinvention of the game is the option to play as a patrol car. The

Format:	PC
Publisher:	Electronic Arts
Developer:	EA Seattle
Release Date:	Q3 1998
Origin:	U.S.

Replays can be used to analyze performance as well as isolate highlights

The option to race as law enforcement is a first for the NFS franchise, creating new forms of multiplayer gameplay

goal of the game used to be to avoid being caught. Now gamers can wear the other hat, with gameplay that is reminiscent of Taito's classic Chase HQ, which adds a new dimension to the single-player mode, but even more to the multiplayer game. Players can divide into teams of up to eight players, with those playing as cops trying to chase down and pull over speeders — a digital version of Fox Television's "World's Scariest Police Chases." The traditional tournament is still in the game, along with a knockout mode and a new ghost mode. In ghost mode, players will be able to save any race, then race against themselves or send the ghost race to a friend over the Internet. There will also be a two-player, split-screen mode on one PC, in the same vein as the console version.

As with each installment of the series, every effort has been made to create a sense of realism. Aside from engine tweaks and new options, Madland and his team braved daylight to gather research, going on patrol with a Washington state sheriff, which involved chases, stops, and plenty of radio chatter. Unlike previous versions, NFSIV has the most accurate real-world physics engine. Where applicable, every nuance of the original cars is re-created. From rollovers to explosive pileups, every crash is much more spectacular.

Technically, certain aspects of each car's performance were altered to make it more fun to drive — not enough, though, to annoy hardcore simulation fans. To help the game appeal to novices as well as experts, a driving-assist option has been created for younger gamers who may not have the skills of their competitors. In addition, NFSIV offers full control over replay to help newbies

pinpoint their mistakes after a race.

But perhaps the biggest advance in NFSIV is the ability to download new cars from EA's web site. This will enable EA to pursue car licenses long after the product ships, and will be interesting to see what hackers can do with this feature.) The plan is to enable players to take their cars into future NFS releases. As part of this new format, players can actually look around a specific car's interior in exact detail. Players can also paint their cars any color with a new editor.

Need for Speed III for PC is a rare case in which a developer goes the extra mile to make the game more than just a console port. If the game succeeds, it will be a lesson to other publishers that simply converting a console game to PC is inexcusable.

It can be hard to pass on narrow roads; just ask the guy in the middle

Dark Vengeance

Can Reality Bytes' realtime dungeon-crawler deliver the real deal — or is it just another cheap deathtrap?

97
999
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1005

Dark Vengeance has a unique over-the-shoulder camera angle that brings players closer to the action without overcrowding the screen

Q uite a bit has happened to *Dark Vengeance* since the third-person, melee-based adventure was first previewed nearly a year ago in **NG 33**. In that time, Reality Bytes has secured GT as its publisher, pushed the release date back, and made some changes in design.

First off, the company brought the number of player characters down to three from five. "We found that the character differentiation had been a little more quantitative than just really qualitative," says Reality Bytes President Jon Chait, "so we decided we wanted to be able to focus even more on the qualitative differentiation."

Of the original cast, the druid and the savage hit the cutting room floor, but Chait says they may reappear in a sequel

The remaining lineup includes the gladiator, the trickster, and the warlock. Chait describes the warlock as the classiest long-range projectile user, which is why he was kept in favor of the savage — the warlock uses spells to launch assaults, as opposed to the savage's arrows. Meanwhile, the gladiator is the

The team behind *Dark Vengeance* is confident that its game will be one of the best realtime adventures this holiday season

Format:	PC
Publisher:	GT Interactive
Developer:	Reality Bytes
Release Date:	Q4 1998
Origin:	U.S.

The game requires players to rely on their wits as much as their trigger fingers. For example, setting up an ambush is far more productive than head-on combat

big, brutish, hand-to-hand weapons user, and the trickster's style is strategically varied. For instance, she can cast a freeze spell and then switch to a dagger.

In an effort to go beyond repetitive, hack-and-slash gameplay, Reality Bytes has spent the last year building levels that immerse the player in the story as well as in the gameplay. "We think that everyone sort of perceives it as being action-focused," says Chait. "But it does have elements of some adventure, fantasy, and real experience-based stories going on in the midst of this gameplay as well."

Reality Bytes has spent the last year building levels that **immerse the player** in the story as well as **in the gameplay**

Player character models are roughly 600 polygons, and the average enemy is anywhere from 250 to 400 polygons

Chait hesitates to use the label RPG, as he rightly feels it's too well-linked to the stereotypical turn-based games that have captivated the D&D crowd. Like Drakan (previewed as Arokh in NG 42) and SegaSoft's forthcoming Skies, Dark Vengeance is a fantasy adventure game, only realtime, all the time. "We're RPG in the truest sense of the word," Chait says, "because you really are assuming the role of the character."

As in traditional RPGs, Dark Vengeance characters grow stronger and more healthy as they gain experience, along with better armor and weapons. But the team members didn't want the game to become bogged down in numbers like so many other fantasy games, and have taken a more organic approach between armaments, they find "fresh ones" that dispel any confusion as to which is better.

Over the course of the game, players must penetrate the underground realm of the dark elves to find the cause of a strange eclipse that has enabled them to overrun the countryside. Each character begins the game with a unique origin level and then moves into the standard series of 15 levels, which are the same for each character. However, the developers believe the characters are different enough to warrant replaying the game as all three.

Beyond specific weapon sets, each character has a skill set, or extra capabilities called "uniques," learned over the course of the game. So, for example, "the gladiator's berserker unique lets him

There are plenty of surprises throughout the game that will certainly catch players off guard

73

The game is loaded with death animations, fire effects, and even a vertigo spell that spins the camera to disorient the player

move a little faster and makes him invulnerable to pain," says head of design David Chai (Jon's brother). "So people can throw as much damage at him as they want to, but he's just gonna be slashing in the middle of it instead of recoiling from what's hitting him."

The warlock and the trickster also have a variety of uniques, and in multiplayer mode they can be used together to create some impressive strategies. Designer and office clown Ben Hansford explains one way a gladiator and trickster can really do some damage in a team scenario. "I'll play the gladiator," says Hansford, "and the first thing I will do is knock back a pain suppressor, and I'll knock back the super invulnerability high." He goes on to explain that David, playing as the trickster, will use some of her unique sticky pipe bombs, which work like the remote mines in Goldeneye. "He will sit there and just stick pipe bombs on me," says Hansford, "then I will run into a room, chase down another player, and when I get close enough, he triggers the pipe bombs, and I explode right on top of him."

This goes beyond anything seen in multiplayer before, but the attention to detail given to the single-player mode is equally uncommon. For instance, in an early level of the game, players must explode some canisters, which knock over columns, and break open a wall through which players can then pass. "We thought, 'Wow, that's really cool,'" says Hansford, "and now we look back and see it as more of a growth stage."

Beyond scripting simple

objects, the sophisticated AI (which includes line-of-sight) has enabled some of the cooler scenarios to come to life. "We have a prison level where these

Pinchers pick up body parts from bins and deliver them to devices that create monsters

gladiatorlike dark elves are obviously being held prisoner," Hansford explains, "and they have these patrolling dark elf serpents who walk the halls. If you pull the lever and open one of the doors, that imprisoned gladiator doesn't care if he sees you or that dark elf guard. Whoever he sees first, he will attack." The point Hansford makes is that stealthy players can time the release of the prisoners so they attack the guard, making players' lives easier by only having to kill the weakened winner.

Aside from the prisoners, *Dark Vengeance* has an impressive array of enemies. These range from clutter and debris that magically rise from the ground to form humanoid woodbots to the undead to one-dimensional knights made of stained glass that leap from their windows in a stunning tribute to the film *Young Sherlock Holmes* (from which these enemies were obviously inspired). But the kicker is the monster machine, a multiroom monster-manufacturing plant, complete with bins of body parts for the player to stumble across. "You see these mechanical pincher arms coming out and picking up a single body part and moving off and you wonder, 'What the hell are these

RIVET is the technology used to produce the game and its visuals

"We have yet to go to the consoles specifically, but we're very interested in Nintendo 64DD"

Jason Davis, vice president of R&D, Reality Bytes

giant pincher arms doing with these body parts?' And later on, you see those same body parts being put in a giant hopper. And out of that hopper comes a creature," says Hansford.

To create an environment where these types of enemies can be implemented by designers and artists without the help of a programmer, Reality Bytes has created the RIVET engine (Realistic Immersive Virtual Environment Technology). RIVET is designed to be a scalable technology, and its features include dynamic lighting, alpha blending, moving brushes, particle systems, and a skeletal-based animation system. The characters are endowed with vertex-specific sensitivity and can bleed from any part of the body, and the animation system is tuned to be weapon-specific, adding just another little touch of realism.

So will *Dark Vengeance* make it to consoles? "Our core technology is definitely platform transferable," says Jason Davis, vice president of R&D. "We have yet to go to the consoles specifically, but we're very interested in Nintendo 64DD. At the moment, our engine base requires more power than the PlayStation."

For now, the company isn't saying more than that. As it stands, it's got plenty of work to do to make a holiday

Many of the creatures encountered in the dungeons have impressive moves as well as supernatural weapons

launch. The voice-over work is just being started, and as yet the company had no outdoor environments to show *Next Generation*, although Davis insists the technology enables them to do outdoor environments first. But if *Dark Vengeance* does make store shelves by December, it could certainly be one of the better-looking (and we hope, better-playing) PC games of '98. NG

The camera automatically gives players the best angle for combat, preventing enemies from sneaking up from behind

THEN AND NOW:

Things often change in the life cycle of a game. Here's what Reality Bytes said about the game last year, and here's where it's at this year

	This Year	Last Year
Number of player characters	3	5
Number of enemies	40	50
Maximum LAN players	32	32
Number of levels	18	20
Indoor levels	Yes	Yes
Outdoor levels	Unseen	Unseen

Milestones

Developers push the limits of existing hardware to produce stunning games

A s 3D acceleration hardware gradually makes developers' jobs easier, it also forces them to conform to the popular techniques of the trade. However, developers attempting to create a new method of delivering 3D worlds find that existing hardware becomes their greatest limitation. Ocean's *Outcast* demonstrates just how important it is for companies to

continually seek new ways to deliver games. With more and more developers resorting to software rendering engines, it's a sign that they're starting to realize that there is much more that can be done with what already exists.

OUTCAST PC
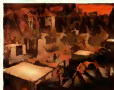
Ocean's highly anticipated adventure features amazing lighting effects, limitless landscapes, and incredible animation without the requirement of a 3D accelerator. If it succeeds, it will be a lesson to other developers that intelligent programming doesn't need the latest hardware

MACROSS

Bandai's sequel to last year's PlayStation bomb boasts a complete overhaul of game mechanics and effects

DAIKATANA PC
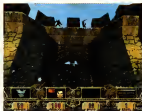
Ion Storm's flagship title visually looks great, but early impressions suggest that it plays a little too much like Quake

TRESPASSER PC

DreamWorks' upcoming dinosaur romp is yet another game boasting amazing visuals without herdware acceleration. It features bump-mapping, shadowcasting, skeletal models, and real-world physics. Why hasn't this been done before?

SPYRO THE DRAGON

Insomniac Games stopped E3 traffic with Spyro. The magical animations by Lead Animator Alein Mendron breathe buoyant life into Spyro's world

F-**ZERO** Nintendo 64
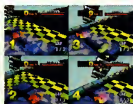
Nintendo has had nothing but success so far with its franchise games. Whether or not the option to forego graphic effects for raw speed will continue that success remains to be seen

THE UNHOLY WAR PlayStation
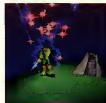
Originally designed as a two-player experience in the vein of *Return Fire*, *The Unholy War* is the latest title to come from Crystal Dynamics and Toys For Bob. The game features both turn-based strategy and an action game

GT 64

Infogrames' latest N64 racer looks great, but its frame rate needs to improve before release

LUNATIK

PC owners get a taste of *Starfox*-like gameplay, thanks to the talented programmers at Pure Entertainment

DEVIL DICE

THQ's current acquisition from Japan for PlayStation requires just as much dexterity as it does wit

SPACE CIRCUS Nintendo 64
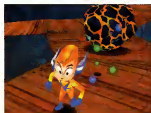
Infogrames pushes Nintendo 64's hardware to its limits with *Space Circus*, intending it to be somewhat of a science fiction Disney cartoon, the game's creators plan to make every interactive situation both humorous and playable at the same time. So far, the goal to prevent graphic fogging seems to have worked well

KATTOBI TUNE

Genki's realistic racer for PlayStation requires patience, a need for resource management, and real-world driving skills

B.L.U.E PlayStation
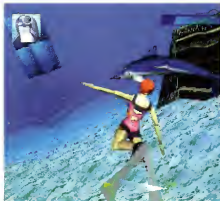
A cross between *Treasures of the Deep* and *Ecco the Dolphin*, Hudson Soft's latest adventure focuses on deep sea exploration. With the help of a friendly dolphin, players must unlock the mysteries of the deep by solving a series of engrossing logic puzzles
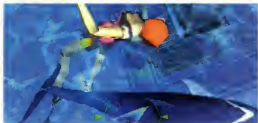
Powerful automatic weapons must be kept out of the wrong hands. These are definitaly the wrong hands.

- Over 40 sinister enemies to engage.
- Four main characters to control.
- 16 spells, four deadly weapons, and endless fighting combos to master.
- www.psygnosis.com/odt to see more.

O.D.T

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RATING PENDING
RP
CONTENT RATED BY
ESRB

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Some days, it does pay to get out of bed.
Unreal's the best shooter since *Quake II*, and we give it the treatment

FINALS

Reviews of the moment, for the moment

Next Generation's reviews have gotten bigger and better, and leaner and meaner at the same time. How's the new format working for everyone? Love it? Hate it? Need something more? Let us know.

★★★★★
Revolutionary
Brilliantly conceived and flawlessly executed; a new high watermark.

★★★★
Excellent
A high-quality and inventive new game. Either a step forward for an existing genre or a successful attempt at creating a new one.

★★★
Good
A solid and competitive example of an established game style.

★★
Average
Perhaps competent — certainly uninspired.

★
Bad
Crucially flawed in design or application.

● Denotes a review of a Japanese product.

A predictable *Quake* beater, but one that
beats *Quake* to a bloody pulp

UNREAL

Platform: **PC**
Publisher: **GT Interactive**
Developer: **Epic**
Megagames

Well, it's been a long time coming. The *Unreal* project was delayed almost as much as Nintendo's *Zelda 64*. Adding to the conventional problems inherent in game production were the new disasters created by an ever-evolving game engine. As it turns out, though, the *Unreal* engine is a beast of near mythical proportions, although at first glance, it looks very much like a tarted up version of *Quake 2*. If you're expecting the sort of generational leap that you immediately noticed between *Doom* and *Quake* — forget it. This is evolution, not revolution.

For one thing, *Unreal* completely redefines the way light sourcing is used in PC games. Ironically, Nintendo 64 and PlayStation consumers are accustomed to the kind of transparencies and reflections used here, but this kind of technology has been slow to arrive on PC, even on souped-up, 3D-capable systems. *Unreal* will run in software, but it's clearly designed as a 3Dfx/PowerVR game.

The engine has changed so dramatically since *Unreal's* inception that a complete overhaul

of textures was required, upping the ante from 8-bit color palettes to 24-bit (photo-realistic, in terms of color) textures. The results are impressive and more importantly, well-designed. Real architectural and organic environments replace *Quake's* somewhat clinical hallways. Rafters have depth and shadow, grassy hills roll rather than jut, and the lighting effects soften and enhance in all the right places.

Unreal also benefits massively from the so-called "Unrealscript," a rather pompous euphemism that merely describes things that console gamers take for granted: Bad guys approach with drama, turning lights on as they walk down stairs, or girders fall, blocking your path or perhaps killing an enemy. More importantly, players can affect the environment, destructively or creatively, moving boxes around to make a bridge or a ladder. Puzzle solving is limited to action scenarios but adds a hell of a lot to the one-player game.

The one-player mode is where *Unreal* defeats *Quake 2* hands down. It is linearly structured, well-plotted, and wonderfully balanced. Level design draws you in and educates you about the world, as well as the weapons and tasks that

Character builds maintain integrity and detail, even in close encounters

await you. The environments do the same, with constant interruptions from computers, klaxons, and creatures, all with a part to play in the unraveling of a genuinely tense scenario. Playing *Unreal* alone in a dark room late at night can be an unsetting experience.

Especially important for solitary players is the level of Artificial Intelligence. We've seen game denizens dodge the occasional bullet before, but the creatures in *Unreal* seem positively prepared for your arrival. It's no good running into a hall full of Skaarj warriors with a teeny pistol, since they will simply roll out of the way, or even send reinforcements around your flank. They may not even be in the same place next time you play (a truly original game

Creature design is attractive but unoriginal. The fully polygonal models look smooth but are hardly inspiring

featured. And yes, they can figure out circle-strafing too — very unnerving.

Multiplayer *Unreal* is another thing entirely — and again, it's clearly better than *Quake 2*. The massive levels are liberating rather than confusing, and the strategy required to best utilize weapons adds huge scope to the ensuing melee. One nice detail: Weapons are clearly visible and distinct in an opponent's hands, enabling players to alter an approach. In fact, each gun serves a dual purpose. Use the regular fire button, and the gun performs a regular (even disappointing) function. Use the alternate trigger, and it develops a personality: The rifle permits unlimited zoom (a la *Goldeneye*), while the Eight Ball gun charges up to eight rocket-powered grenades for simultaneous launch. The results can be quite astonishing splash of viscera.

And the gore isn't (just) gratuitous. The brilliantly conceived character models used in *Unreal* take damage in an almost realistic fashion. A head shot, for example, may result in instant death, while a bullet to the right arms has little effect. This applies to both heroes and villains. Careful aim should be taken in both one-player and deathmatch modes.

In spite of its "official" release, however, *Unreal* is a strange game in that it will never be quite finished. Although the final game is remarkably bug-free, the simple design tools, which have been included with the game, sans documentation, mean that patches, levels, skins, even whole new adventures will be appearing

with even more frequency than those seen for the *Quake* franchise. *Unreal* is pretty open-ended.

Next Generation tested the game on a number of systems, and *Unreal* performed remarkably well on most. Even in software on a Pentium 200, it was clear, sharp, playable, and reasonably smooth. At the other end of the spectrum, a Pentium II 333 with SLI twin Voodoo[2] cards (Canopus 12 meg units) appeared to open a hole in the space/time continuum, giving "smooth frame rate" a whole new meaning. As with most games of this ilk, though, even the most potent setup suffers when the player looks around the important axis quickly.

And near-perfect as it is, *Unreal* suffers in a couple of jarring aspects. Again, the keyboard setup

screen is absurd, badly designed, and irritating. *Quake 2*, *Forsaken*, and now *Unreal* all require near-complete remapping of the keyboard for the average player, and yet the setup screen still doesn't let you select keys easily or logically. Another complaint is that aside from the secondary fire button, the sense of *Quake* deja vu is almost embarrassing.

But it still boils down to one question: Is *Unreal* better than *Quake 2*? The answer is yes. Absolutely.

We'll even go further: *Unreal* is the single best action game ever to appear on PC. Ion Storm's John Romero will be watching this carefully, and no doubt taking a good look at his own *Daikatana*. It's hard to see how the genre can be much improved after this.

Rating: ★★★★★

Character Artificial Intelligence is higher than in current rival shooters, but it tends to involve running and dodging rather than any sort of strategic thinking. The bad guys are simply fast and hard to shoot

Lens flare, never a subtle ingredient in graphic design, is so completely overused in *Unreal* that it almost becomes charming … but not quite

Another N64 vaporware title finally sees release —
is it a force for good or evil?

MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE

Platform: **Nintendo 64**
Publisher: **Ocean**
Developer: **Infogrames**

Never before has the title of a game so echoed the development process involved in the game's creation. Originally thought to be both a cartridge and 64DD title, *Mission: Impossible* soon fell off the development map after countless delays forced the team to make changes to the design. Eventually, everybody began to believe that the game had become one of the many Nintendo vaporware projects that were announced in the system's first year but soon drowned in their own overcomplicated designs. (On that note, *Robotech: Crystal Dreams* is still rumored to be coming some day.) But following delay after delay, Infogrames finally took matters back into its own hands, moved the development back to France, and got the game out as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, it shows.

Mission: Impossible still has some of the brilliance that we touted way back in *NG 28*, but its constant redesigns and obvious out-the-door push have left it in an awkward state of being "nearly done" and "nearly very cool." For example, the level

As in the movie, players get their assignments in a variety of places. If only the assignments themselves were as organized

The environments look nice, but the game needs tighter control and more frequent opportunities to save your progress

designs are all quite good, with lots of variety in the tasks and plenty of puzzles to solve, but they lack the fine level of polish, which we saw in *Goldeneye*, that really makes a game stand out. The control just isn't quite as tight as it needs to be in many situations, and sometimes there are strange glitches in the environment (it's possible to get stuck in a corner, for example). Many of the puzzles are great and make sense, whereas others can be solved only through random chance and experimentation. "Inconsistent" is the best word to describe the whole experience, *Mission: Impossible* can go from inspiration to frustration in record time — which is very bad news for those fragile N64 controllers.

The game's storyline roughly mirrors that of the movie it's based on, but it diverges quite a bit to deliver more in-depth gameplay. Every major point is covered, from infiltrating the Russian Embassy to dropping down into the CIA's secret computer room from above. Each

level is broken up into several smaller missions, many of which can take more than 15 or 20 minutes to solve, even after you figure out what you are supposed to do. Worse, it's only possible to save between missions, which is one of the most annoying aspects of the game. For instance, players might complete an elaborate 15 step puzzle to gain access to a security elevator, only to be shot because they entered the room with their guns drawn. This kind of thing happens all the time, and it forces gamers to replay some excruciatingly long levels over and over until they figure out what they've been doing wrong.

Overall, *Mission: Impossible* has its share of both hits and misses, and after playing we can't shake the feeling that just a bit more tweaking and Q&A would have done wonders for this title. As it stands, it's a fun game to play, with some intriguing puzzle-based action, but after a three-year wait, the flaws make this game somewhat of a letdown.

Rating: ★★★

With the **World Cup just behind us**,
Konami gives soccer fans **something to cheer about**

INTERNATIONAL SUPERSTAR SOCCER 98

Platform: **Nintendo 64**
Publisher: **Konami**
Developer: **Major A**

There are several referees to choose from, each with varying degrees of incompetence. Clearly, this one is blind

T he World Cup has just passed, and soccer fever is still high after nation battled nation in France '98. The timing is perfect, then, for yet another soccer sim. Konami brings us a sequel with very few new features, but it still seems to work beautifully.

What's changed since the first N64 incarnation of this game? To be perfectly honest, not nearly enough. There are new camera angles, which can be selected from the outset, but not modified in real time. They do improve the game for some players; the three-quarter vertical view is far superior for some strategies. For fast-paced gameplay, however, the side-on view still feels best.

Konami lacks real player licenses, so names are recognizable, but they're changed enough to avoid lawsuits. The team rosters have been updated to reflect — vaguely — who's playing this year.

The game is the brainchild of development team Major A, which seems to have perfected the

original game instead of overhauling it. Every aspect seems familiar and also just a little bit better — the graphics are a fraction smoother, the controls a tad more responsive.

The only major improvement is the AI of the teams. The players react cleverly, trying to avoid

offside traps or running into space for a cross. It makes the pace frenetic and realistic.

Small touches, like stretcher bearers and post-goal reactions, make the endless green a little more visually arousing. The match commentary is funny and accurate and adds a heck of a lot of atmosphere. Sixteen play strategies double the eight of the original, but gameplay is the real joy: responsive, wonderfully accurate, and truly reflexive. *Superstar Soccer* takes seconds to learn and hours to master — the perfect recipe for any game. No multiplayer N64 sports game comes even close to it.

After a few hours of play, you'll forgive the apparent lack of improvement and realize that subtlety is everything in the most popular sport on Earth. The only thing that could really improve this series would be the inclusion of real players' names and correct uniforms. Until that happens, *Superstar Soccer* is just a shade short of perfect.

Rating: ★★★★

New, improved camera angles are more than cosmetic — they change the flow of the game

The penalty shoot-out is easily the best-realized in any soccer game, requiring a perfect combination of skill and timing

ASC Games and DreamForge conspire on
a game that can cause nightmares

SANITARIUM

Platform: **PC**
Publisher: **ASC**
Developer: **DreamForge**

What other game ever had a character perform his own therapy by becoming characters from his own past?

Sometimes a game grabs us because it's technically innovative. Other times, a game grabs us because while it stays within established gameplay conventions, its approach is so different it simply stands out.

Sanitarium falls into the latter category. The game's mechanics rarely stray beyond the usual graphic adventure point-and-click gameplay we've seen before, and there are few (if any) technical innovations. Yet, the combination of story and genuinely creepy atmosphere is among the most unusual we've ever come across. Parts of this game are flat-out disturbing, thanks mostly to its nearly unique premise: *Sanitarium* depicts its lead character Max's insanity from the inside out, in a sense inviting anyone who plays to share his madness.

For this reason, it sure keeps a player guessing. Each of *Sanitarium*'s nine chapters hops between what might (or might not be) the real world as seen through the eyes of a madman, and a series of subquests in which Max's neuroses spill over and he "becomes" someone else for a time. Each of these transformations is also set in a completely different world — for instance, an ancient Aztec temple or a comic book-inspired planet of Cyclopes.

Many games offer players a chance to live a life or have a perspective they couldn't otherwise have — few succeed on anything more than a superficial, "you are the hero" level. *Sanitarium* takes this idea and runs with it.

Which isn't to say it's perfect. To begin with, it's not all that
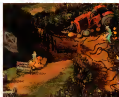
The game's settings are all out of whack and creepy

challenging — anyone with even a moderate knowledge of graphic adventure conventions can breeze through its three CDs in a day or two. Many puzzles are vaguely tile-based affairs with little relevance to what's going on. While some of the voice acting is quite good, a lot of it, well, isn't. Lastly, the production copy given **Next Gen** for review had a few annoying technical glitches that seriously interfered with gameplay at least once (a patch is available via the Web).

That said, *Sanitarium* is still vastly different and thoroughly entertaining. If only more companies would take gaming into as different a direction, our jobs would be a lot more interesting.

Rating: ★★★★

The protagonist Max switches between alternate realities inside his own head, and a crumbling, creepy asylum tainted by hallucinations — this is not your father's graphic adventure

In A World Enslaved By Ghosts Of The Past,
Twisted Egos Bend To The Whims Of Insanity,
Unleashing All That Is Forbidden.

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Our games go to 11!

After too many years' absence, a classic RPG
series returns, **all grown up and in 3D**

MIGHT AND MAGIC VI:
THE MANDATE OF HEAVEN

Platform: **PC**
Publisher: **3DO Company**
Developer: **New World Computing**

The combat system can be switched between realtime and turn-based (left). Blow it, and you're dead (above)

It's been years since the last Might and Magic game, but the latest title in the series is well worth the wait.

M&M devotees will recognize quite a bit of the old Might and Magic flavor in number six, but there's also new elements. The game takes place shortly after the end of Heroes of Might and Magic II. The good side has won, and Roland Ironfist is on the throne. However, he disappears after searching for a missing member of the court, and Roland's son, Prince Nicolai, is too young to rule the realm. A new cult, the Temple of Baa, rises in the land and proclaims that the lineage of Ironfist has lost the Mandate of Heaven — the right to rule, granted by the gods. The player's job is to restore the mandate and uncover the plot of the Temple of Baa to overthrow the realm.

The game begins in a small town on the edge of the world of Enroth. Just as in any other role-playing game, players have to build experience, find items, learn spells, and fight the bad guys. As they go through the game, they encounter many subquests that bolster their stats, and they find many items that strike down the opposition.

The game contains a mix of a realtime battle system and a turn-based mode. The combination works well, although characters can't move during the turn-based mode. It would be nice for players to be able to back up a few steps during their turns. Instead, they have to hit Enter to start realtime mode, move their party, and hit Enter again to pause the action.

Another unusual aspect of this role-playing game is the method by which characters move up levels. Rather than simply going to another level after fighting for a few hours, players will find a training facility once they've earned enough experience, then pay for each character's training. This training awards points that players can assign to any number of skills, depending on how they want to advance the character.

Although the graphics aren't astounding, they're quite good. The two engines that run the game — the Horizon engine for outdoors and the Labyrinth engine for indoors — do their job well. The outside views are especially well-done, and the dungeons are sufficiently creepy, with a large variety of environments and enemies.

As far as new role-playing games go, this is one of the best yet. There's plenty of story for those who want to find it, and lots of dungeon crawling for people who just want to kill things. The world stays continuous, so if players are finding treasure in one cavern, something can be happening half a world away to affect their adventure.

In the end, this is a well-updated spin on a classic series. **Rating:** ★★★★

The game's outdoor engine is surprisingly good, with a dazzling array of colors and textures

It may be **among the last of its kind**, but here's
one **Saturn** game that can hold its head high

BURNING RANGERS

Platform: **Saturn**
Publisher: **Sega of America**
Developer: **Sonic Team**

Using an enhanced version of its *Nights* engine, Sonic Team makes its first true attempt at a 3D platformer. But instead of doing a realistic *Tomb Raider* clone or a cartoony copy of *Mario 64*, Sonic Team takes the genre down a new route, with a refreshingly innovative, fast-paced action title that milks every drop of the Saturn's power.

Players assume the role of a member of a futuristic firefighting team, and armed with an array of firepower and a few acrobatic moves, head full-on into the flame-saturated buildings to rescue people trapped inside. The designers don't try to hide their *Sonic* roots either. Injecting very *Sonic* and *Nights*-style gameplay elements, like the collection of gems and the rating system at the end of each level.

Audio cues play an integral part in the game. Throughout the missions, characters are frequently conversing over two-way radios, offering a mix of subtle and obvious clues about where to find the next hostage and fiery blaze to extinguish. Following these stream of commands is almost crucial to successfully completing each level, and, although players are certainly welcome to explore every inch of the buildings. The voice acting is admittedly a bit over-the-top, but that only adds to *Burning Rangers'* anime flavor.

The graphics are superb, offering a very "you are there" sensation, with excellent transparency and lighting effects suited for each level's condition. But cram all these fire effects and elaborate room designs on the Saturn and you're just asking for trouble. The 3D engine clips along at a decent rate, but textures occasionally tear and disappear, and the camera sometimes can't keep up with the characters' quick, exaggerated movements. Either *Burning Rangers* is pushing the system beyond its limits, or the *Nights* engine just doesn't quite cut it. Still, the action is top-notch.

Sonic Team completes its Saturn development on a roll, and one can't help but be excited about the team's potential on Sega's Dreamcast. We can't wait.

The game's anime flavor is predictable but works well
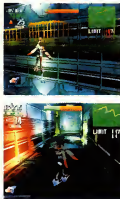
Actually, *Burning Rangers* makes a nice epitaph for the Saturn library. Despite some graphical shortcomings, it controls well, shows a great deal of creativity, and offers unique and interesting gameplay

Rating: ★★★★

MIKE PIAZZA'S STRIKE ZONE

Platform: Nintendo 64
Publisher: GT Interactive
Developer: Devil's Thumb

Mike Piazza's Strike Zone caps off this year's spring Nintendo 64 baseball lineup — but having arrived after Acclaim's excellent All Star Baseball '99 and Nintendo's own Ken Griffey Jr., it does nothing for the genre's image. Shipping first would have been its only saving grace.

Let's leave the extremely plain, underwhelming, blurry 3D graphics alone and dig a bit deeper. The only batting perspective available is an awkward camera position outside the batter's box, which makes it absolutely impossible to see where the pitches are headed. Worse yet, the designers seemed to realize the viewpoint problems and to compensate, made batting too easy by adding a color-coded comet trail to the pitch — if it's red, it's a strike.

After hitting the ball, players are treated to a fielding engine not unlike those from baseball games of the 8- and 16-bit eras. Remember the slide-whistle sound effect that gave the illusion of a rising and falling baseball? For some reason, the designers of Strike Zone thought this ancient element was necessary, and its inclusion tarnishes the smidgen of realism that the game attempts to provide.

On top of all that, Strike Zone features one of the sloppiest season-editing interfaces ever seen in a sports title. Although the game includes the ability to create, trade, and draft players, figuring out how to do it is an exercise in frustration.

There are really only two baseball choices for Nintendo 64 this year — and Strike Zone isn't one of them.

Rating: ★
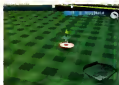
Mike Piazza's Strike Zone is as sloppy as they come

MORTAL KOMBAT 4

Platform: Nintendo 64
Publisher: Midway
Developer: Eurocom

Mortal Kombat 4, the latest in Midway's never-ending fighting franchise, is most notably different from its predecessors in one way, it is in 3D. The clunky 2D sprite-based engine of old has been replaced with the power of polygons, but other than that, there really isn't much difference between MK4 and the original.

Eurocom, the developer that ported War Gods to N64, has done the same for MK4, and players who enjoyed the arcade version will not be disappointed with the near-perfect N64 conversion. MK4 for Nintendo 64 is just as fast and smooth, and it includes all the same fighters and arenas, and all the uncensored gore and fatalities. The two versions look nearly identical, but Eurocom has actually added fighters, arenas, and chests while implementing effects that weren't in the arcade version, such as realtime light-sourcing on characters.

Unfortunately, although the port is perfect, the game itself is not. Mortal Kombat 4 suffers from the same disease that's been eating away at the Street Fighter franchise for years. It's the same old game with a new look. There are some new things, such as the ability to hurl in-game objects (rocks and so on) as weapons, but the game's fighting system remains unchanged.

That said, Mortal Kombat 4 is a guilty pleasure; although it's unoriginal, the game is fast and rewarding. MK4 is an excellent port and, though it's average in general, it is still one of the best fighters for the console.

Rating: ★★★

Mortal Kombat is finally in 3D, but it's still pretty much the same

WETRIX

Platform: Nintendo 64
Publisher: Ocean
Developer: Zed Two

Although it's tempting to think of Ocean's new game as just another attempt at filling Nintendo's patchy game library, Wetrix — like Tetrisphere before it — is an original and cool puzzle game. Wetrix is Tetris reborn as 3D landscape design. Players are given four falling shapes to use, which can either raise or lower the land level, with an eye toward forming "lakes" and keeping water (which also falls) from spilling. Other obstacles fall as well, including bombs and earthquakes.

Wetrix sucks players into its dropsy, psychedelic world for a good long time. With five modes of play and one basic theme, Wetrix is a unique game that's cleverly thought out. It's not enough to just keep the water from leaking, players need to earn megapoints by creating multiple lakes, managing firewalls and bombs, and reconstructing the landscape over and over again. The game's ambient soundtrack, accurate aqua sound effects, and overall groovy feel are big pluses, and it maintains a decent graphical look.

However, few key strategies are required for success, and Wetrix isn't terribly varied or difficult. It's as deep as N64's other puzzler Tetrisphere, but not much more. That is its biggest downfall. It's unusual and fun, then it wears thin. There's nothing else like Wetrix on any other system, but that's just barely good enough.

Rating: ★★★
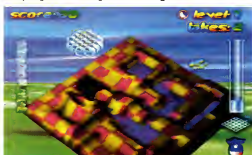
Wetrix is a unique puzzler — not amazing, but fun

ALLISON IS HAVING THE ULTIMATE BAD HARE DAY.

SPACE BUNNIES MUST DIE!

AZURE DREAMS

Platform: **PlayStation**
Publisher: **Konami**
Developer: **Konami**

Konami's Azure Dreams, with its high-concept premise — merge an RPG with the strategy of a Monster Rancher — surely attracted the attention of forward-thinking console players with a penchant for either, if not both, genres. Japanese games are known for executing a simple premise extremely well, but lately this specificity has given way to high-concept hybrids — like Azure Dreams.

In what might seem almost inevitable, the game doesn't contribute anything new to either genre, and, as a whole, is a confused mess There are

several areas in which the concept goes awry. First and foremost are the graphics, which are far, far below par. The unrealized gameplay, which at its heart can best be described as an action RPG, consists of running around, jumping, and whacking things with a sword while finding and training familiars to assist in combat. A randomly generated dungeon map might conceivably add to the replay value, but as it is, Azure Dreams will not exactly have many gamers coming back for long.

Rating: ★★

Azure Dreams is part strategy, part action, and part RPG. The result? A confusing mess that won't please fans of any genre

GRANSTREAM SAGA

Platform: **PlayStation**
Publisher: **THQ**
Developer: **Shade**

Granstream Saga starts with a noble premise. Create an entirely polygonal action RPG. Unfortunately, the game's design is limited by that premise, and with only an average RPG storyline, the game as a whole is fairly bland

Granstream's first major hurdle is the sheer number of polygons used for each character. Sure, they look great, but the minute more than two characters are on the screen (much less four or five), the whole game slows down to a crawl. This design also weakens combat; to keep a fast-paced, no one ever fights more than one

creature at a time. Using fewer polygons would have helped the game tremendously.

The technical problems could be forgiven if the plot were exciting, but it's about average too. It's mostly cliched, tried-and-true stuff, and, despite a few noticeably cool moments, we've seen it all before. Even more annoying is that the puzzles often don't make sense. For example, players first meet one of the lead characters by walking in on her while she's in the shower, and she tries to kill them with a battle ax. Then, she decides she'll trust them if they go out and steal a gem. The characters' motivations are confusing and forced, to say the least.

Overall, Granstream Saga isn't a bad effort; it's just an average one. Neither the gameplay nor the storyline elevates it into the same category as Square's Final Fantasy, Konami's Suikoden, or Capcom's Breath of Fire.

Rating: ★★
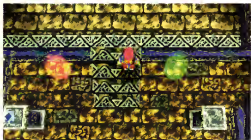
Granstream Saga looks nice enough in screenshots, but this is one clear case of gameplay sacrificed for graphics

JERSEY DEVIL

Platform: **PlayStation**
Publisher: **MegaToon**
Developer: **Sony Interactive**

Developed by MegaToon, Jersey Devil is a 3D platformer in the style of Mario 64 and Croc. The game, which is

published by Sony Interactive, tells the story of the mythical devil, a deviously cute hero of sorts, out to stop a mad scientist from taking over the world with his mutated plants.

As the Jersey Devil, players can jump, run, tail-whip, punch, and glide their way through a plethora of levels infested with vegetable-based enemies. The character design, both for Jersey Devil and the game's off-the-wall cast of foes, is excellent and holds a gamer's interest

Unfortunately, good character design is about as deep as Jersey Devil's innovation goes. The game borrows from nearly every platform game that came

before it and offers the genre nothing new. Instead of coins, the Jersey Devil searches out pumpkins for extra lives, Crash Bandicoot smashes boxes, Jersey Devil smashes boxes, Croc pushes objects around to reach certain locations, Jersey Devil does the same.

In fact, there is nothing that Jersey Devil does that another platformer hasn't done just as well before. That said, it's not a bad game, just tiresome in a "been it all before" kind of way. Anyone looking for something fresh for PlayStation's stale platform genre probably won't be that happy with this game

Rating: ★★★
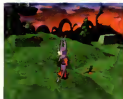
Besides its central mascot, Jersey Devil offers nothing new

SENTINEL RETURNS

Platform:	PlayStation
Publisher:	Psygnosis
Developer:	No Name Games

S *entinel Returns* is a shoddy remake of the 8-bit classic. Don't get us wrong — the gameplay remains basically unchanged. Several editors at **Next**

Generation are fans of the original (*Sentinel* ranked 53rd in the "Top 100 Games of All Time," **Vol 21**), and players of like mind will feel right at home cloning themselves and soaking boulders and robots, hoping to drain the life from the Sentinel. The catch is that players never know which direction the Sentinel is looking, and if it sees them, its gaze sucks the energy right out of them

This simple concept managed to generate tremendous paranoia and tension in the original. The controls are the same for this update, and they do generate a feeling of suspense because they move so slowly (which is the designers' intent). However, they don't work well with the PlayStation controller. To make matters worse, the game's engine — a rash of chunky textures, garish colors, and a grainy sky — doesn't do much to sustain or enhance the mood. Many will think that the simplicity of the original looked and played better

The music (contributed by horror icon John Carpenter) is perfect and generates far more tension than the graphics do.

Those who have fond memories of the original or who crave a new PlayStation experience should rent before buying. It's definitely an acquired taste

Rating: ★★

Sentinel Returns remakes a classic and practically botches it. Even fans are disappointed

BLACK DAHLIA

Platform:	PC
Publisher:	Take 2 Interactive
Developer:	Take 2 Interactive

T ake 2 tries another foray into the interactive movie/puzzle adventure game genre with a new murder mystery thriller. This time, though, instead of starring *Ripper's* Christopher Walken, it has Dennis Hopper and Teri Garr. The interface works in much the same way as that of the latest Tex Murphy game *Overseer*. Players wander through 3D prerendered environments and use the mouse to rotate the view 360° when they're standing in place.

Like both *Ripper* and *Overseer*, *Black Dahlia* has its fair share of meaningless puzzles, melding to poor acting, and beautiful graphics. The story is based on actual events that occurred near the beginning of World War II, and the development team did a good job with the research, if little else. Although

the game is fictional, it's accurate in the details, from the art in the background to the historical events that bump around the edges of the story, and it nearly captures the spirit of the 1940s.

However, the game also requires a lot of reading (there are lots of files and letters to find) and listening to dialogue, which doesn't do much for its pace. The puzzles, when they finally appear, also demand plenty of patience. Take 2 has always had a knack for "What were they thinking?" puzzle design, and *Black Dahlia* starts off early with the stumpers. The game seems as if it were made to sell hint books, and those who play without one are likely to end up bashing the computer in frustration

Rating: ★★

ARMY MEN

Platform:	PC
Publisher:	3DO
Developer:	Studio 3DO

I deally, *Army Men* would be the perfect game for anyone who remembers what a joy it was to get a new box of plastic soldiers and blow them up, douse them with gasoline, or fry them with a magnifying glass — or, better yet, put them in a can with an M80 and blow them to little bits. When first announced as a realtime strategy game, 3DO's *Army Men* seemed as if it would incorporate some of those zany elements and recapture the madness of youth. Unfortunately, the final product doesn't fulfill that expectation

Army Men is instead a straight-ahead war game, in which players act as Sarge, who is sent out to conduct missions — escort a convoy, rescue some comrades, that sort of thing. There are a few funny moments (such as one mission in which Sarge must steal plastic from a bank), but not enough of them. The game would have been a million times better if it had taken place in a backyard, with all the things that make playing with army men fun: a random dog attack, bottle rockets, firecrackers, a hose, and so on.

Without those elements, *Army Men* is just another realtime strategy game. That said, it's a solid, fun example of the genre, and anyone looking for a new strategy game with a very nice graphic twist should seriously consider this.

Rating: ★★★

Plastic men, yes; realistic battlefield, no. *Army Men* sorta missed the boat on this one

Black Dahlia's acting and conversations are much less interesting than the graphics

FORSAKEN

Platform: PC
Publisher: Acclaim
Developer: Probe Entertainment
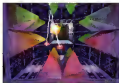
The graphics really push the envelope — the depth of colors is simply amazing

Forsaken has been one of the most highly anticipated games in recent memory, having been described as both a *Descent* and *Quake* killer, with awesome accelerated graphics and a new spin on the 3D action genre. In the end, however, it falls short of those lofty goals. Sure, the pretty graphics are there, but the game looks that little something special to push it over the hump to greatness.

What is that something? It's a feeling of atmosphere, the sense of wonder induced by both the graphics and the gameplay. Although the graphics are certainly top-notch (good enough to help set a new standard), it's still hard to shake the feeling that *Forsaken* is just a prettier version of *Descent*.

The single-player game becomes repetitious after a while; it consists of killing the same enemies time after time. There is some humor in *Forsaken*, but it seems out of place. Either go the *Duke Nukem* route, or don't — there is no in-between. Also, the game limits the number of lives allowed to the player. Come on, this is a PC game, not a con-op. The multiplayer game is rather unbalanced — once players get loaded up, there's no stopping them, and the respawning of weapons is shaky at best.

All that said, *Forsaken* is a good game that will provide a nice distraction until players get their hands on the big guns like *Sin*, *Half-Life*, and *Duke Nukem Forever*.

Rating: ★★★

One of the bad guys bites it, all in glorious Technicolor

MONSTER TRUCK MADNESS 2

Platform: PC
Publisher: Microsoft
Developer: Terminal Reality

The original *Monster Truck Madness* wasn't heralded for its gameplay, but it was notable for its support of new technologies (DirectX, 3D accelerators, force feedback). Developer Terminal Reality went back to the drawing board and came up with a new engine, Photos2.

As a result, control within the game is solid. Again, force feedback users are the preferred method of play, but even using the keyboard gives it a fun experience. The feel is arcadelike, but there's a good deal of simulation within the suspensions of the trucks, and players have to be careful going over rough terrain.

There are a number of different modes within the game, ranging from Circuit to Rally to Summit. The Circuit mode features extended single-lap races on tracks and is arguably the weakest of the three. The Rally mode consists of multilap races over rougher terrain. This is easily the best of the lot and really shows off the physics engine. Summit mode is an action-packed multiplayer version of King of the Hill, with multiplayer supported via LAN, Microsoft's Internet Gaming Zone, and modem.

For some reason, Microsoft shelled out some bucks for a WCW license, but it hardly has any effect on gameplay. The only glaring problem with the game is that even with the best 3D accelerator, there really isn't a good sense of speed. But even this shortcoming is negligible within the many options and multiplayer modes. Overall, the new version is a definite improvement.

Rating: ★★★

With its vastly revamped game engine, *Monster Truck Madness 2* is a definite improvement over the original — what it all has to do with Hulk Hogan and the rest of the WCW crew we have no idea

ROCKY MOUNTAIN TROPHY HUNTER

Platform: PC
Publisher: WizardWorks
Developer: Sunstorm

Trophy Hunter is the sequel to WizardWorks' monstrously popular casual gamer hit *Deer Hunter*, and it's pretty much more of the same. The main difference is that in *Trophy Hunter*, there's a selection of game animals to pick off — moose, elk, mountain goat, and bear — as opposed to the original's "deer only" approach.

Most of the other changes fall into the category of things needed to track and attract the new animals, like the bear call. Also, a spotter scope has been added, so a player can see where animals are from the map screen. It's also possible to actively chase after an animal (sort of) and even follow its blood trail if it's only been wounded. On the technical side, Sunstorm has gotten rid of the scrolling slow-down that plagued the original every time a deer was onscreen (this made it ridiculously easy to spot them).

We admit, *Trophy Hunter* is oddly addictive for the first half hour — once you've bagged a big one, it's almost impossible to stop until you've got a trophy in all four categories. On the other hand, there's only one map to hunt around on (there is a map editor, but it's not the most user-friendly one we've ever seen), and the whole thing becomes tedious fast. This is a great example of appealing to an underserved niche in the market, but a pretty mediocre game.

Rating: ★★

For our money, a game where the bears could attack back would have been much more interesting

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SWARM

Platform: **PC**
Publisher: **Reflex Entertainment**
Developer: **Reflex Entertainment**

In these days of fancy-shmancy 3D-accelerated frag-fests, in which the main draw is top-of-the-line graphics and all the gore one can handle, it's refreshing when an action game is released that goes back to the roots of gaming. And Swarm is one of those games, relying on established, if a little too simple, modes of gameplay.

In the tardtune world of Swarm, an energy source, EZT, has surfaced, and humans want it. Unfortunately, so does the alien race Clagnor. In goes the player as Rawl Masteson, a government prisoner who has "volunteered" to collect EZT for the next year, if he survives, he goes free.

A 2D action game, Swarm is essentially Asteroids with better graphics. The player flies around, collects EZT, and blows up lots and lots of aliens. There is nothing ground-breaking here, but the game looks nice, plays nice (although the controls could use a bit of tweaking), and comes with more than 100 missions.

For gamers after some good old-fashioned, arcade-style action, Swarm delivers. Just don't go in expecting bleeding-edge graphics or an enthralling story because they're nowhere to be found here.

Rating: ★★

This picture pretty much sums up *Swarm* — fly around and blow stuff up

ESCAPE VELOCITY: OVERRIDE

Platform: **Mac**
Publisher: **Ambrosia Software**
Developer: **Ambrosia Software**

In a Mac market bereft of big-name game development, the small fry have their chance to shine, and none has done better than Ambrosia Software. It has consistently produced high-quality games for the platform, and surprisingly, has turned a profit as a shareware-only company. This tradition has continued with Escape Velocity: Override.

EV: Override is something of a sequel to Escape Velocity, the trading and space-simulation cult hit of a few years ago. This title works off the same engine, but it has a whole new storyline, with a galaxy five times larger than the last one and five new alien civilizations.

Size isn't the only thing that matters, however. Now, as players progress in the game, they have the chance to change the universe. Conquer planets, win wars, destroy civilizations — options that were never available before are now completed masters of course. Although the world is as open-ended as before, story undercurrents guide the player like a leaf on water. In the end, the epic sweep through the galaxy is dizzying, but in a good way.

The gameplay is similar to that in the first version, but the scope and design behind the new final frontier override any comparisons

Rating: ★★★★
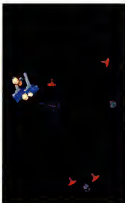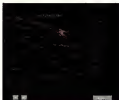
The galaxy in *Escape Velocity: Override* is five times larger than the one in the original, and the gameplay lives up to the improved size

STAR CONTROL 3

Platform: **Mac**
Publisher: **MacSoft**
Developer: **Accolade**

Somebody made an error naming this game. The word "control" implies the ability to actually play the game, and "3" indicates that Mac gamers have played two other games with this title. Neither is true, and this game shouldn't have been ported to the Mac.

Star Control 3 is a mediocre port of a PC game that came out more than a year ago. Although Star Control 3 was a cult classic, its sequels had gameplay that was dated and badly received. By now, it's almost obsolete.

For a realtime space and strategy simulation, it has an incredibly awkward interface. First, on the galactic scale, players must navigate around a pseudo-3D blizzard of stars, with no labels, no distance references, not even perspective cues. Once players have chosen destinations, intersystem travel is monotonous, and there's no graceful way to back out to galaxy view. The planet screen is almost useless — Spacewell Not and Master of Orion II's navigation is

so much smoother it's not even funny.

Resource management and combat are jokes. Colonization is automatic. Facilities are built automatically, resources are mined by unseen slaves, and colonists breed like clockwork. Players can only manage effort percentages, and that's a piddling amount of power for someone who's supposedly in control of the entire race.

To top it all off, there's a storyline that Mac users are already supposed to be intimately familiar with. And, as new races are discovered, players are treated to painfully stilted dialogue and jerky puppet animation. The interactive dialogue system is so bad that it makes Elsa look like a witty conversationalist. Simple black-and-white text would have been less painful.

Although there are worse space conquest/simulation games out on the game market, not one of those is on the Macintosh.

Rating: ★★
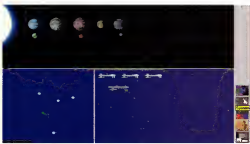
Star Control 3 is yet another sop to Mac gamers — it's a couple of years old and looks it

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THE **GAMER'S** GUIDE

The quintessential guide to released software

Welcome to the Gamer's Guide, the ultimate resource for checking what games to buy. Every month we add the reviews from last issue and push out an equal number of older ones. Which ones, you ask? Generally we leave the console titles in, even for games that are out of print, since there's a large used market. So PC games get dumped first, especially old, really bad PC titles (which, paradoxically, makes the PC look really, really good) if you just check the ratings? Once again, please note the issue number — technology and game design march on relentlessly, so a game that got ★★★★ in NG 6 might be hard-pressed to score ★★★ today.

title	publisher	rating	#
Nintendo 64			
1080° Snowboarding	Nintendo	★★★★	37
Aero Fighters Assault	Video Systems Inc.	★★	36
Aero Gauge	ASCII	★★	36
All-Star Baseball '99	Acclaim	★★★	41
Automobile Lamborghini 64	Titus	★★	37
Banjo-Kazooie	Nintendo	★★★★	43
Blast Corps	Nintendo	★★★★	25
Clay Fighter 63 1/3	Interplay	★★	36
Cruisin' USA	Nintendo	★	24
Dark Rift	Vic Tokai	★★	25
Doddy Kong Racing	Nintendo	★★★★	37
Doom 64	Williams	★★★	26
Duke Nukem 64	GT Interactive	★★★	37
Extreme-G	Acclaim	★★★	37
F-1 Pole Position 64	UBI Soft	★★	36
FIFA Road to the World Cup 64	Electronic Arts	★★★	39
FIFA Soccer 64	Electronic Arts	★★	30
Fighter's Destiny	Ocean	★★★	41
Forsaken	Acclaim	★★★	42
GoldenEye 007	Nintendo	★★★★★	33
Hexen	GT Interactive	★★	27
International Superstar Soccer 64	Konami	★★★★	31
Killer Instinct Gold	Nintendo	★★★	25
Mace: The Dark Age	Midway	★★	37
Madden 64	Electronic Arts	★★★	37
Marvel Kart 64	Nintendo	★★★★	30
Multi-Racing Championship	Ocean	★★★	32
Mystical Ninja	Konami	★★★	39
NBA In the Zone 64	Konami	★★	41
Olympic Hockey '98	Midway	★★	41
Pilotwings 64	Nintendo	★★★★	24
QB Club '99	Acclaim	★★★	41
Quake 64	Midway	★★★	41
Quest 64	THQ	★★	43
Rampage World Tour	Midway	★★	41
Robotron 64	Crave Entertainment	★★	39
San Francisco Rush	Midway	★★★	35
Shadows of the Empire	Nintendo	★★★★	24
Snowboard Kids	Atlus Software	★★★	42
StarFox 64	Nintendo	★★★★★	30
Super Mario 64	Nintendo	★★★★★	22
Tetrisphere	Nintendo	★★★★	31
Top Gear Rally	Midway	★★★	37
Turok: Dinosaur Hunter	Acclaim	★★★	24
War Gods	Midway	★★	31
WaveRace 64	Nintendo	★★★★★	23
Wayne Gretzky's 3D Hockey	Midway	★★★	24
Wayne Gretzky's 3D Hockey '98	Midway	★★★	37
Yoshi's Story	Nintendo	★★★	41
Yuke Yuke Troublemakers	Enix	★★★	42

title	publisher	rating	#
PlayStation			
2Xtreme	SCEA	★★★	25
A-Train	SCEA	★★	39
Abe's Oddysee	GT Interactive	★★★★	35
Ace Combat 2	Namco	★★★★	36
Adidas Power Soccer	Psygnosis	★★	25
Adventures of Lomax, The	Psygnosis	★★	26
Agile Warrior	Virgin	★★	13
Alien Trilogy	Acclaim	★★	18
Alundra	Working Designs	★★★★	41
Andretti Racing	Electronic Arts	★★★	29
Aquanaut's Holiday	SCEA	★★★	15
Area 51	GT Interactive	★★	22
Area 51	Midway	★★★	22
Armored Core	SCEA	★★★★	40
Arc Collection One, The	Midway	★★★	34
Auto Destruct	Electronic Arts	★★★	39
Battlezon Champions	Lucasarts	★★★	21
Battlestations	Electronic Arts	★★	31
Beyond the Beyond	SCEA	★★	26
Blast Chamber	Activision	★★	24
Blast Chamber	Activision	★★★	22
Bolero	Koei	★★	26
Blood Omen: Legacy of Kain	Crystal Dynamics	★★★	34
Bloody Road	SCEA	★★★	29
Bogey Dead 6	Action of Japan	★★	27
Bottom of the Ninth	Konami	★★★	25
Braindead Force	Laser	★★★	41
Bravo Air Race	THQ	★★	34
Broken Helix	Konami	★★	41

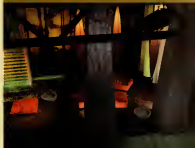| title	publisher	rating	#
Bubsy 3D	Accolade	★★	22
Bug Riders	GT Interactive	★★★	34
Burning Road	Playmates	★★★	26
Bushido Blade	Sony	★★★★	41
Bushido Blade 2	SquareSoft	★★★	43
Bust-a-Move	Enix	★★★★	41
Buster Bros Collection	Capcom	★★★	30
Carnival '96	SCEA	★★	26
Carnage Heart	SCEA	★★★	36
Casper	Interplay	★★	23
Castlevania	Konami	★★★★	38
Chaos Control	Philips	★★	22
Clock Tower	Ascii	★★	40
Codename Tenka	Playmates	★★★	28
Colony Wars	Psygnosis	★★★★	36
Contra: Legacy of War	Konami	★★★	25
Cool Boarders	SCEA	★★★	27
Cool Boarders 2	SCEA	★★★★	38
Counter Crisis	GT Interactive	★★	37
Crash 2: Cortex Strikes Back	SCEA	★★★	36
Crash Bandicoot	SCEA	★★★★	23
Crescent	SCEA	★★	37
Critic: The Legend of the Golden	Your Interactive	★★★	35
Crow: City of Angels, The	Acclaim	★	24
Crusader: No Remorse	Origin	★★★	29
Crypt Killer	Konami	★	23
Cybersled	Namco	★★	13
Cyberspeed	SCEA	★★	16
Dark Omen	Electronic Arts	★★★	34
Dark Stalkers	Capcom	★★★	16
Darklight Conflict	Electronic Arts	★★★	34
Dead or Alive	Tecmo	★★★	39
Deathtrap Dungeon	Eidos	★★★	41
Descent	Interplay	★★★	13
Descent Maximum	Interplay	★★★	29
Destruction Derby	Psygnosis	★★★★	13
Destruction Derby 2	Psygnosis	★★★	26
Diablo	Electronic Arts	★★★★	37
Die Hard Trilogy	Fox Interactive	★★★	23
Disney's Hercules	Virgin Interactive	★★	34
Disworld	Universal Interactive	★★	24
Disworld: Enemies Within The	Wizard Works	★★★	34
Disruptor	Universal	★★★	18
Dragon Ball GT Final Bout	Namco	★★	38
Dragonheart, Fire & Stone	Acclaim	★	18
Dynasty Warriors	Koei	★★★	31
Einhander	SCEA	★★★★	42
Fade to Black	Electronic Arts	★★	21
Fantastic 4	Acclaim	★★	37
Felony 11-79	Asc	★★★	34
FIFA '97	Electronic Arts	★★★	24
Fighting Force	Eidos	★★★	38
Final Doom	Williams	★★★	24
Final Fantasy Tactics	SCEA	★★★★	41
Final Fantasy VII	SCEA	★★★★★	37
Floating Runner	THQ	★★	27
Formula 1	Psygnosis	★★★★	24
Formula Karts	Acclaim	★★	18
Frank Thomas Baseball	Acclaim	★★	37
Frogger	Hasbro Interactive	★★	37
G-Darius	THQ	★★★	42
Gex	Crystal Dynamics	★★★	22
Gex: Enter the Gecko	Crystal Dynamics	★★★	42
Ghost in the Shell	THQ	★★★	40
Goal Storm	Konami	★★	24
Goal Storm '97	Konami	★★★	30
Gran Turismo	SCEA	★★★★★	42
Grand Slam	SCEA	★★	31
Grand Tour Racing '98	Activision	★★★	40
Gunbird	Atlus	★★★	38
Gunship	MicroProse	★★	37
Hardcore 4x4	Accolade	★★	33
Herc's Adventures	Lucasarts	★★★	33
Hexen	GT Interactive	★★	21
In the Hunt	THQ	★★★	15
In the Zone	Konami	★★★	23
In the Zone 2	Konami	★★★	37
Independence Day	Fox Interactive	★★	26
Iron & Blood	Acclaim	★★	22
Iron Man XO	Acclaim	★★	33
Ironman	SCEA	★★★	34
Jaggel Dice	Activision	★★	42
Jumping Flash 2	SCEA	★★★	20

title	publisher	rating	#
Jupiter Strike	Acclaim	★★	13
K-1 The Arena Fighters	THQ	★★	40
Klonoa the Wind	SCEA	★★★★	43
King's Field	SCEA	★★★	18
King's Field 2	SCEA	★★★	23
King's Field 3	Ascii	★★★	41
Kings Field	Psygnosis	★★★	30
League of Pain	Psygnosis	★★★	38
Libero	Interplay	★★★★	13
Lost Runner	Working Designs	★★★★	39
Lost World: Jurassic Park, The	SCEA	★★★★	34
Machine Hunter	MGM Interactive	★★	34
Madden '97	EA Sports	★★★	21
Madden '98	Electronic Arts	★★★★	36
March Madness '98	Electronic Arts	★★★	38
MDK	Playmates	★★★★	34
Mega Man 8	Capcom	★★★	34
MegaMan X4	Capcom	★★★	38
Micro Machines V3	Midway	★★★	38
Midway Collection II, The	Midway	★★★	39
MLB '98	SCEA	★★★★	34
MLB Pennant Race	SCEA	★★★★	25
Monster Rancher	Tecmo	★★★★	42
Mortal Kombat 3	Williams	★★★	18
Mortal Kombat Mythologies	Midway	★★★	37
Moto Racer	Electronic Arts	★★★★	38
Moto Racer	Electronic Arts	★★★★	38
Moto' Teki Grand Prix	Naxat	★★★	39
Nagano Winter Olympics '98	Konami	★★	39
Namco Museum Volume 1	Namco	★★★	22
Namco Museum Volume 2	Namco	★★★	26
Namco Museum Volume 3	Namco	★★★	37
NASCAR Racing	Sierra	★★	34
NBA Jam Extreme	Acclaim	★★	24
NBA Hangtime	Williams	★★★	26
NBA Jam TE	Acclaim	★★★	18
NBA Live '97	Electronic Arts	★★★	24
NBA Shoot Out	SCEA	★★★	18
NBA Shoot Out '97	SCEA	★★★	29
NCAA Basketball	Konami	★★★	34
NCAA Gamebreaker '98	Electronic Arts	★★★	43
Need for Speed II	Electronic Arts	★★★	31
Need For Speed III	Electronic Arts	★★★★	43
NeverSpeed Racing	Electronic Arts	★★★	24
NFL Gameday	SCEA	★★★★	24
NFL Gameday '98	SCEA	★★★★	37
NHL '97	Electronic Arts	★★★	24
NHL '98	Electronic Arts	★★★★	38
NHL Face Off '98	SCEA	★★★★	40
Nightmare Creatures	Activision	★★★	38
Nuclear Strike	Electronic Arts	★★★	39
Olympic Soccer	U.S. Gold	★★	21
One	Ascii	★★★	38
Ore no Ryori	SCEA	★★★	41
Overboard	Psygnosis	★★★	37
Overblood	Electronic Arts	★★★	34
Pandemonium	Crystal Dynamics	★★★	26
Pandemic The Ripper	GT Interactive	★★	43
Peak Performance	Atlus	★★★	38
Perfect Weapon	ASC Games	★★	24
Poy Poy	Konami	★★★	42
PGA '98	Electronic Arts	★★★	39
PGA Tour Invitational '98	Electronic Arts	★★★	12
Philosoma	SCEA	★★	16
Pitball	SCEA	★★★	29
PitFall 3D	Activision	★★★	43
PO'ed	Accolade	★★★	13
Point Blank	Namco	★★★★	41
Porsche Challenge	SCEA	★★★	31
Power Kombat	Konami	★★★	39
Power Move Wrestling	SCEA	★★	13
Power Serve 3D Tennis	Ocean	★★	13
Powerbeat Racing	THQ	★★★	40
Poy Poy	Konami	★★★	42
Project Overkill	Konami	★★	24
Psychic Detective	Electronic Arts	★★	21
Psychic Force	Acclaim	★★	40
Q*bert	Hasbro	★★★	41
R-Types	Ascii	★★★	39
Raiden Project	SCEA	★★★	13
Rally Cross	SCEA	★★★	34
Rampage	GT Interactive	★★★	39
Rapid Racer	Sony	★★★	39
Raystorm	Working Designs	★★★	37
Rayman	UBI Soft	★★★	13
Raystorm	THQ	★★★	38
Rebel Assault 2	Lucasarts	★★	23
Reboot	Electronic Arts	★★	39
ReBoot	EA	★★	43

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LETTERS

We never leave our post

In your September 1997 issue, you had a preview article for a seemingly innovative game called *Messiah*. In your 25 Breakthrough Games issue, you had a smaller preview of it. Have you received any new information regarding development and possible release dates for the game? By the way, I love your magazine. Thanks.

Andrew Kissel
akissel@trinity.pvt.k12.al.us

Shiny is still working on the game, and even a year later, it only has one level to show, although the engine is much further along. Our prediction? The game will hit shelves before the holidays

Your **NG 31** cover story of *Blasto* seemed convincing enough for me to check out this "next generation" of PlayStation games, only to find it contradicted by the review the game received in **NG 41** with a rating of only two stars. I'm thinking twice about renewing my subscription. Your journalistic standards rank between Geraldo Rivera's search of Al Capone's vault and the "Elvis Conspiracy" by Bill Bixby of the late

Blasto — hey, it seemed like a good idea at the time

1980s. I'm sure your readers must be as angry as I am about putting *Blasto* on the cover when the game ended up with a disappointing review 10 or 11 months later. It has led me to lose faith in your magazine. This and your stupid marketing gimmick to your **NG** subscribers who ordered a year's subscription with a CD-ROM, only to find out they only received half or less than the CD-ROMs they're expected to get.

I'm surprised your parent company wasn't sued for breach of contract and false information (false information is not covered under free press given under the First Amendment of the Constitution). I hope you learned your lesson from this about *Metal Gear Solid*, or there's going to be hell to pay.

name withheld by request
internationalplayboy99@
yahoo.com

We make no excuses for the *Blasto* cover — embarrassed, sheepish grins, maybe, but no excuses. Sony showed us one game, which looked impressive at the time, then changed it completely and rushed it out the door a year later following a long delay. We'd like to think the solid drubbing we gave the game in **NG 41** would set the record straight on how we felt about the title when it was released, but if you feel otherwise, by all means, try to find another magazine that's as brutally honest with its readers and more importantly, with itself when it's proven wrong.

And we do apologize for the cancellation of the CD-ROM, a business decision that wasn't made lightly. All subscribers to the CD-ROM edition have had their subscriptions extended to cover the difference in cost, and we are looking at options for other cool things to include with the magazine.

I have never written a letter to a magazine before, but I felt compelled to do so after reading issue 42.

I was extremely offended by the letter written by Jayson Hill. I feel that he has trivialized our tragedy here in Jonesboro in order to support everyone's favorite hobby.

I, too, was chagrined when a local official stated that stimuli such as videogames could be at fault for this tragic shooting. Mr. Hill might have seen something different than I on television (Jonesboro was on nearly every channel), but I got the impression from what I saw that videogames were cited as an example and not solely blamed for the tragedy. I must admit, however, that I found it extremely difficult to play the sniper portions of my favorite N64 title *Goldeneye* immediately after the incident.

What every news source from "Nightline" to "Politically Incorrect" stated following the tragedy was that perhaps the gun culture of the South was at fault. I find it ironic that Mr. Hill states that our "pervasive gun culture" was ignored when it actually is still in the news today. Personally, I feel that placing blame on the guns is nearly as ridiculous as the videogame example

The remainder of Mr. Hill's remarks are flaky absurd and I believe written solely for their reactionary value. I do not consider myself part of a "backward culture that reaches the second-class citizenship of women." Ever heard of "Southern Belles"? We love, honor, cherish, and respect our women, and it seems I remember mentioning that in my wedding vows, too. I don't believe that we "teach violence early with a rampant domestic abuse rate" either. Family is important down

here, and I suspect that whatever abuse that may unfortunately exist is no greater than that in the rest of the country.

Probably the most offensive comment referred to is our "Bible Belt culture" that supposedly shuns people who disbelieve in God and people who choose to worship differently. All the churches of this community worked together throughout this tragedy in order to aid the healing process. We did not beat anyone over the head with a Bible, as Mr. Hill suggests we do, but rather reached out with love to our neighbors in need. Actually, I suppose that's what the churches do here, not only in times of tragedy but as a personal measure of outreach and evangelism.

I can certainly understand Mr. Hill's defense of videogames. I rather enjoy them myself. But to use our tragedy as a platform for his defense is an insult to our community and our dead. Our community has simply been crying out for answers in this heart-wrenching time. The answers are unknown to us, but whatever they may be, I feel that they reach far beyond videogames, guns, and the culture of the South. Whatever those reasons may be, I really doubt they are to be found on any official's or newsperson's lips, or even in the words of your magazine.

Blake Barnett
Jonesboro, Arkansas

Possibly the worst thing about a tragedy like the Jonesboro shooting is the finger pointing and scapegoating that inevitably follow, which is just as inevitably followed by backlash and more finger pointing. The result is that instead of binding us together, it only further divides and alienates us.

And this, frankly, is the last

Was the PlayStation's success due solely to its gray casing? Maybe, but that doesn't explain how Genesis did so well in the 16-bit days

word we'll print on the subject.

In the story about politicians trying to ban violent games in Florida because of the effects they imagine it has on kids, I would like to point out a psychological study done by Derek Scott of Strathclyde University in Glasgow, Scotland (covered in The Journal of Psychology, V.129, March 1995, pages 121-132). In his study, Scott had a hypothesis similar to that of the noble politicians, that violent games would increase feelings of aggression, thereby increasing violent actions.

What Scott found, however, was that when test subjects played the more violent games, this actually lowered their feelings of aggression and hostility. What this means is that people relieve their feelings of aggression and their need to express anger and violent emotions through videogames, making them less likely to act violently after playing these games. While in no means a perfect study (for example, it never studied long-term effects), it is a very good starting point to defeating the notion that violent games make kids more violent. And as for the politicians, maybe they should spend more time worrying about gangs, crime, and the health care system and less about videogames.

D'Jay Robinson
mbc49@mimet.gob.mb.ca

While citing studies is definitely a

good way to buttress an argument on either side, and further studies should always be encouraged, in the end, proving how voluntary subjects (often college undergrads who need the credits) respond under clinical conditions may or may not mean much outside the lab. Food for thought, anyway.

Hasn't anyone noticed? It's so blatantly obvious! Only one thing determines if a videogame system will rule supreme or end up fighting for bits and scraps. No, it's not its processing power. It's not third-party support. It doesn't have anything to do with the amount of bits or whether it's cartridge or CD-based. What is the key to a system's success? I'll tell you! The key to a videogame system's success is ... whether or not it is colored gray! Make it gray and you are guaranteed complete and total success!

Let's look at the track record of videogame systems beginning with the first 8-bit Nintendo. It was gray and it dominated in its time. It obliterated the Sega Master System and even after the Genesis was released, it did well. Then came the SNES. It was awesome. It dominated the Genesis. It was gray. Then came the next generation systems: the Saturn, N64, and the PSX. Which ended up on top? That's right, the gray one, the PlayStation. Last but not least, the most successful videogame system in history was also gray: the Game Boy. Yeah, I

know, it's a bunch of different colors now, but it was gray when it generated its success. So to all the videogame system designers out there: Make it gray, and the green will come!

REK
vertigoh@juno.com

Hmmm, you might be on to something. Come to think of it, Dreamcast is gray — maybe Bernie Stolar's sent as Sony helped him out in more ways than one

Excellent mag, but there's something that's been troubling me somewhat. In all that legal stuff at the bottom of the masthead on the table of contents, some guy seems to be scribbling out a bunch of gibberish. I think it may be some sort of twisted cry for help. Let me say that I understand that in an office, people need to have some fun, but treating people like this is unethical. The poor freak is probably locked up in the basement. Open a window or unchain him for a while, or something, because I find it heavily detracts from my Next Generation reading experience.

Mike
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Sorry, but the only way we could get that "poor freak" to put together the table of contents every month (a thankless job if ever there was one), was to allow a certain creative and artistic license. Heck, it's less than a square inch of text — just put your thumb over it and keep reading.

I have recently noticed that in NG in the Finals section, you've been using a lot of space on bad games. I'll use NG 42 as an example. The game Deathtrap Dungeon, which was given only one star, was given about a quarter of a page. Judge Dredd, which also got only one star, you gave nearly half a page. Punky Skunk, also receiving one star, was also given nearly a quarter of a page. On these three games combined, nearly a page of space was wasted, which could've been used on much better games.

Don't misunderstand me,

however. I do want to know if a game is bad so I can steer clear of it, but a simple paragraph for each game saying it's bad and giving a few major reasons why would have been good enough. By doing this, you're giving more room for the better, above average games. I, for one, would rather read about the many good points of a very good game, not the many bad of a very bad game. Overall, I must say that your magazine is a great one. However, this is a "slight problem" that I think it couldn't hurt to correct.

Albert Young
Wayne, Pennsylvania

Funny you should bring this up, since we revamped and revitalized the Finals section just last month, giving more space to games that deserve it (and expanding the section as a whole). While it's tempting to give truly bad games exactly one sentence ("This is bad!") and be done with it, we've always felt it was better to explain why we felt it was lacking, if only to clue developers in so they might avoid such mistakes in the future — plus, it's just plain fun to slam something awful.

In the meantime, what do you think of the new format? We appreciate your comments. NG

From now on, bad games will get less space in the hallowed pages of the Finals section

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by **Steve Kent**, author of a forthcoming book on the history of videogames

The beginning of Jobs

Several interesting people came through Atari during its early years. Eugene Jarvis, the creator of Defender, Robotron 2084, and Cruis'n World, started his career making pinball tables for Atari. Brenda Laurel, founder of Purple Moon, a girls' software company, started there. The most famous Atari alumni, however, is Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple Computer.

Eighteen-year-old Jobs showed up at Atari, unannounced and unexpected, asking for work. He had long hair, a stringy beard, and was generally ungroomed. Not knowing how to get rid of the kid, a woman from personnel went to Al Alcorn, the head of engineering, and asked him what to do. Alcorn laughed, "We should either talk to the kid or call the police."

The kid was a dropout and really grungy. He was 18 years old and he knew something. He had a spark of brilliance, so I said, "Great. I'll give you a job working for a real engineer."

— Al Alcorn

Other companies may never have taken a risk on a scraggly looking dropout, but Atari was unusual. The assembly line was populated with bikers, and one of the receptionists was rumored to be a stripper. There's also a rather unlikely legend that said that you could get stoned breathing the air that came out of the company's ventilation system. Once hired, Jobs immediately set about making enemies. It only took one day for Don Lang, Jobs' new boss, to complain to Alcorn. It wasn't just a matter of grooming. He offended other employees by openly treating them like idiots.

If he thought you were a dumb shit, he'd treat you like a shit. That pissed certain people off. I liked him a lot ... still do.

— Nolan Bushnell

Like many early computer geniuses, Jobs cared more about technology than about social graces. But he was dismissed as a lightweight and a hippie by many of his fellow engineers. According to Alcorn, Jobs once went to work and told his supervisor he was fasting. "He said, 'If I pass out, just lay me on the workbench. Don't call the police, please. I'll be fine. I'm just a little weak right now.'"

Despite his attitude and grooming, Jobs was on his way to becoming one of the computer industry's greatest visionaries.

In 1975, Jobs decided to make a pilgrimage to India. At the time, several Tarot machines had broken down in Germany. Alcorn offered Jobs a one-way ticket to Germany if he would fix the machines.

He wanted to go to India to meet his guru. I said, "Fine, I've got a problem in Germany."

He fixed their problem, but they were freaked because Jobs is the antithesis of the Germans. They're meat and potatoes and beer, and he's air and water and vegetables ... maybe.

— Al Alcorn

Jobs returned to Atari in time to play a pivotal role in the design of Breakout — one of the most successful games of the pre-Space Invaders era. Nolan Bushnell knew consumers would love Breakout, but he worried about the cost of manufacturing the game.

In those days, Atari shipped approximately 10,000 copies of its most popular games. Because of repair costs and reduced circuit board space, Atari saved approximately $100,000 for each chip removed before production. Bushnell wanted his engineers to reduce the number of chips in Breakout, but he got a less-than-enthusiastic response when he asked for volunteers.

Steve Jobs accepted the challenge. By this time, Jobs and Steve Wozniak had begun developing the Apple II, generally identified as the machine that launched the personal computer industry. Wozniak, who worked for Hewlett-Packard, was a member of the Homebrew Computer Club, a group of early enthusiasts who built their own computers. Other Homebrew members considered Wozniak, or "Woz," to be the most brilliant member of the club. Jobs turned to Wozniak for help in minimizing Breakout's circuitry.

Jobs never designed a lick of anything in his life. He had Woz do it [redesign Breakout]. Woz did it in like 72 hours nonstop, and all in his head. He got it down to 20 or 30 ICs. It was remarkable ... a tour de force.

— Al Alcorn

According to Bushnell, Jobs earned $100 for each chip he removed from the game — a final bonus of $5,000. But Jobs lied to Wozniak about the amount of the bonus, telling him he received only $500 for the work.

Jobs misled Wozniak. Jobs got five grand and Woz got half of $500.

— Nolan Bushnell

Now Jobs didn't use the money for his own personal gain. He put it into Apple. But still ... that was the beginning of the end of the friendship between Woz and Jobs.

— Al Alcorn

According to reliable sources, when Woz found out about the deception, years later, he broke down and cried. The final joke, however, was on Atari. "[Breakout] was so minimized that nobody else could build it. Nobody could understand what Woz did but Woz. It was this brilliant piece of engineering, but it was just unproducible," says Alcorn. The machine had to be redesigned, and finally shipped with around 100 IC chips.

> ## Steve Jobs showed up at **Atari, unannounced**, asking for work

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